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# ANNA NUGENT

A NOVEL

BY

ISABEL C. CLARKE

*Author of "Carina," etc.*



NEW YORK, CINCINNATI, CHICAGO

BENZIGER BROTHERS

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## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. The Nugent Family . . . . .	7
II. The Coming and Going of Gay Lawton . . . . .	31
III. Eighteen Years Old . . . . .	50
IV. Mrs. Nugent Interrupts . . . . .	71
V. At the Villa Caterina . . . . .	95
VI. News from London . . . . .	111
VII. The Coming of Michael . . . . .	125
VIII. Countess Selvi . . . . .	149
IX. Blue Days at Sea . . . . .	170
X. A Conversion . . . . .	191
XI. Arranging a Marriage . . . . .	212
XII. The Plot Succeeds . . . . .	232
XIII. An Awkward Thing to Play with Souls . . . . .	250
XIV. Clouds on the Horizon . . . . .	271
XV. Failure . . . . .	294
XVI. Broken Off . . . . .	317
XVII. Committed for Trial . . . . .	339
XVIII. Not Guilty . . . . .	361
XIX. The Dream is Fulfilled . . . . .	377
XX. A Letter from Countess Benedetto Selvi . . . . .	392



# ANNA NUGENT

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## CHAPTER I

### THE NUGENT FAMILY

#### I

"I DON'T mind having Anna," said Mrs. Nugent, in her sleepy way. "The boys," she added, with sudden emphasis, as if she were now thoroughly awake, "will be out in the world by the time she grows up."

"What has that got to do with it?" inquired Athelstan Nugent.

She shot a sleepy glance, not devoid of irritability, at him, murmured, "Everything," and relapsed into dreamland.

He always found it a difficult matter, even now after twenty-four years of matrimony, to follow the trend of his wife's absent-minded, detached sentences. They had a sure sequence in her own mind, and possessed, as he was aware, what psychologists sometimes call emotional congruity; and he was ready to believe that his own inability to grasp their inner significance was due to some lack in himself. He was a shrewd, hard-headed business man, and understood things best when they were set down in black and white. Of the two he preferred figures to words. Words were

prone to deceive—or how could lawyers live?—but with figures you knew where you were. . . . If they blundered you knew where you were, too. Perhaps it was on account of their irrefragable logic that Mrs. Nugent so disliked figures. Thus she could never remember what her dresses cost. Ten—twenty pounds—what did it matter, since to pay for them you had only to write a check? It may be mentioned that Athelstan Nugent's married life had been largely spent in the good-humored writing of checks.

"She won't be in the way—there's May's room," continued Mrs. Nugent, while the letter she had just been reading fell to the floor with a thin little protesting crackle. "I hate empty rooms—the servants let them get so dusty. It wants doing up, but that must wait now."

Athelstan Nugent's cousin, Temple Nugent, had lately died, leaving an orphan daughter, Anna, whose guardianship he was now invited to accept.

"Well, then, I suppose she'd better come," he said. "It'll be a change for her—London after Italy. I was always against Temple's settling abroad. It's all very well to spend a few years there when you're young, but it's awfully rough on your executors if you stay and die there. Property too . . . what'll a girl like that do with a villa in Italy?" He shook his head. "First expatriating yourself—then marrying an Italian. . . . I never saw her. People said she was good-looking. But you never know where you are with a foreigner. They're not like us."

"She must either go to a convent school or have a Catholic governess here," said Mrs. Nugent. "How absurd of Temple to let her be brought up in her mother's faith. Why, the woman died when Anna was two, so there was really no need to consider her feelings."

"But he was a convert himself and he's made a

great point in his will about Anna's being educated as a Catholic," said Athelstan. "We shall have to be very strict about it."

"Someone will have to take her to church," murmured Mrs. Nugent, "and I think it had better be Michael. He's the least likely to be influenced. I can't go myself—the incense gives me asthma."

Having settled this point to her satisfaction, she relapsed into silence. Athelstan was very deeply engrossed in the prospectus of a singularly attractive company. His own name appeared upon the list of directors, and it gratified him to think that to see it there would give confidence to those innumerable investors who would rush to subscribe. Reading it impartially in the cold light of print, it was difficult to believe that enormous, fantastic fortunes were not awaiting those who were fortunate enough to have shares allotted to them. His thoughts were temporarily diverted from Anna Nugent, but his wife brought him back from these lofty financial soarings by saying:

"I daresay May will have her down there, sometimes in the holidays."

"Doubt it," said Athelstan, shaking his head. May was not at all disposed to be lavish of hospitality toward her own family, with the exception of her favorite brother, Rodney. He was often invited to shoot, hunt, fish and play golf on Lord Chingford's beautiful Devonshire property—a house ceded to him by his father, old Lord Wendle, at the time of his marriage to May Nugent. May was not often in London, except for a few weeks in the height of the season, and she seldom brought her children—of whom there were two—to town.

"I'm sure I never fussed about my children's health as May does," Mrs. Nugent had been heard to say querulously, "and look how strong they all are!" It

was no fun to be a grandmother at forty-five if one was never consulted about the babies, and when one's proffered advice was airily dismissed as old-fashioned, and even antiquated.

"Oh, that's never done now! It's quite gone out. I wonder any of us lived to grow up," May used to say disdainfully.

"There's an awful lot in his will about safeguarding her religion, Juliet," said Athelstan, returning to that document, of which a copy lay on the table beside him.

"There would be. You may be sure the priests made him put all that in."

"I suppose so. We always thought he only turned Catholic to please Vittoria—she refused to marry him otherwise. He seemed quite tepid, and then she died so very soon."

Yet, had he been tepid—this quiet student with his nose in his books and his heart in the grave with his darling Vittoria? . . . It was impossible to say, and these stringent, elaborate, and detailed instructions concerning his only child's education seemed to give the lie to that suggested indifference.

Perhaps it was because he believed Athelstan and his wife to be the most tolerant and unprejudiced people in the world, that he had consigned his little daughter to their care.

Athelstan and Temple had been boys together, going to the same schools and spending their holidays, for the most part, under the same roof, but they had been friends rather from propinquity than from any community of aim or interest. But that past intimacy, which had perished utterly when Temple, as a young man, had gone to live at Sant' Elena, a little town on the Ligurian coast, made Athelstan all the more ready now to accept the new responsibility thrust upon him—the guardianship of the little girl, Anna. He

had a good home to offer her; his wife made no objection, and he was conscious of rather liking the idea. He had missed May a good deal since her marriage.

"I shall go out and fetch her myself," said Mrs. Nugent. "I should like to see what sort of a place Sant' Elena is. Next week will be time enough. This Countess——" she picked up the letter and glanced at it again—"Countess Selvi seems quite ready to keep an eye upon her for the present. I wonder if she and Temple?" She broke off absently. They knew so very little about Temple, his friends, his mode of life. He had written about once a year, generally at Christmas, giving Athelstan his brief, unimportant news. There was always a mention of Anna in the letters, and last year he had acknowledged that he wasn't feeling very fit and the doctors had talked of an operation, but he hoped to escape that.

But there had never been any mention of Countess Selvi, yet in the rather effusive letter which Mrs. Nugent had just received from that lady, she seemed to take it for granted that they had heard of her, and of her friendship for "dear Vittoria," for "darling Anna," and even for Temple himself.

"Benedetto and Anna are just like brother and sister," she wrote; "my boy will be quite desolate at losing his little friend."

"I expect we shall find her much more Italian than English," said Mrs. Nugent. "I think it was a great mistake to send her here to us after educating her entirely abroad like that."

"I wonder what Michael and Rodney will say?" said Athelstan.

His two sons were away from home just then. Michael, the elder, was at Oxford, and Rodney was at Sandhurst. Athelstan was very proud of them, especially of Rodney, who was good-looking and charming, popular with both men and women.

Michael was of a colder type, more reserved, more of a Nugent; he could never quite make the fellow out. Athelstan wondered why his wife should have settled so spontaneously that to Michael should be relegated the task of escorting Anna to Mass, judging him to be the least likely of anyone to be influenced by the glamour and enchantment of Rome. It seemed to him one of those arbitrary, puzzling decisions of hers, for which, search as he might, he could find no adequate reason.

## 2

Mrs. Nugent was one of those apparently indolent, apathetic people who when aroused become almost diabolically active. This hidden quality had never manifested itself with such appalling and dynamic energy as in the days when she had resolved to bring about a marriage between her daughter, May, and Lord Chingford during the last year of the War. Even Athelstan had been astonished and secretly dismayed at this exhibition of competency and efficiency. Accurate in aim and deadly in accomplishment, she completely overthrew Lord Wendle's objections based upon the extreme youth of his son. Men younger than he was, she declared, were getting married every day. Athelstan, with a reluctance he was careful not to betray, clinched the matter by settling a large sum upon the young couple. Things weren't going too well in the city just then, and it was an inconvenient moment. But his wife impressed upon him that May's future happiness was at stake. It was an investment, too, she declared, as Chingford would inherit a great deal of property when his father died. But as Lord Wendle was a hale and strong man in the middle fifties, this contingency was of no

immediate consequence. Still, the marriage took place, and had turned out very well. Mrs. Nugent then lapsed into her normal state of lethargy, as if she had completely exhausted the accumulated energy which for so many years had been repressed.

It was in something of this same spirit that she started for Sant' Elena to "settle" Temple Nugent's affairs, and fetch his daughter. Those with whom she came into contact on that occasion formed a very erroneous estimate of her character.

There were difficulties, of course. To begin with, she couldn't speak Italian, her acquaintance with that language being limited to such phrases as *La donna è mobile*, and *Ah, che la morte*, which were extremely useless for all practical purposes. She was horrified, too, at the slowness with which things are achieved in Italy. Of course, it was pleasant at the Villa Caterina during that mild March weather, when the flowers were springing up in the garden, and a film of delicate emerald was beginning to show on the trees and shrubs. She even thought the climate preferable to that of the French Riviera, the winds were less cold. But the house! The doors that didn't shut, the windows that let in great draughts of sea air, the inadequacy of the wood fires to heat large lofty rooms with stone walls and floors. Temple had rather let the place go to pieces during those last years of his life. It had been difficult, too, to get things done during the War, when practically all Italy's man-power had been concentrated along the Austrian frontier.

Mrs. Nugent's manner was also slightly offensive to old Francesca. She shouted at her in English, as many people do, thinking that noise emphasizes a foreign language and makes it easier of interpretation. What had she been about, not to buy mourning for Miss Anna? Anna, who happened to be present, interpreted the question. The old woman excused her-

self on various grounds, the principal one being that she had had no money for some months past—the Signor Nugent (she pronounced it Noojenty) having been too ill to attend to such things. And he had always hated mourning, would never permit Anna to wear it even after her mother died. That was why Anna had appeared before Mrs. Nugent—who was henceforth to be Aunt Juliet to her—in a white woolen dress with a colored bow in her hair. Francesca explained all this with that desperate and obsequious humility with which the Italian servant will receive even the mildest reproof.

Mrs. Nugent was surprised to find that Anna was so tall. She had vaguely realized she must be about fourteen, but as Temple had always written of her as a little girl, she had expected to see someone more of a child. She was very pretty, tall and slight for her years, holding herself well, and with a certain look of distinction that Mrs. Nugent was swift to observe. She was as fair as an English child, with her bright honey-colored hair, her clear dark gray eyes, her smooth, pale, flawless skin. But she had the small well-cut features of her Latin mother, the little head, the tiny well-shaped hands and feet. Mrs. Nugent was thankful the girl was so young, otherwise it would have been imprudent to adopt her in this way. One of the boys might have fallen in love with her, and how disastrous that would have been, considering her religion and the smallness of her fortune! But Michael was twenty-two now, and Rodney not twenty—they would hardly notice her. Rodney liked girls, but Michael, in his queer, studious isolation, seemed never to think about them at all. Rodney was, however, nearly always away from home; when not at Sandhurst he was generally staying at Wakebourne with May, to whom he was very devoted.

Then there was Countess Selvi to be interviewed,

in her great square cream-colored palatial villa standing on the wooded heights above Sant' Elena. A faded blonde fussy woman with a lanky son a few years older than Anna. Inclined, so Mrs. Nugent thought, to be gushingly sentimental about Temple. Still, she was useful in her way, for she was so competent to assist in dealing with lawyers and agents, and she had also found some excellent, careful American tenants for the Villa Caterina, who were prepared to pay a large rent for the privilege of living there. As long as Anna remained with her London relations, her own little fortune could accumulate. Athelstan Nugent was a rich man who could afford to give his ward a comfortable home and a good education. Countess Selvi had explained all this to Anna in order to try to overcome her obstinate dislike to the thought of leaving the Villa Caterina. It was very kind, she said, of her uncle and aunt—as they were called despite the fact that they were only cousins—to give her a home. It would be a real advantage to her to be educated in London for a few years. Although the Countess was English, it was many years since she had been in London, and then she had hated it, but she did not want to depress poor Anna still further, so painted it in as rosy and attractive a light as possible.

Besides, she had added, it would be impossible for Anna to go on living at the Villa Caterina, as it was to be occupied, almost at once, by other people.

"Our villa?" Anna had said. Somehow, the thought that strangers were coming to live there was very distasteful to her. She had always imagined she would remain there herself with old Francesca, for even during her father's lifetime she had never seen a great deal of him. He was always very busy with his books, and, though he was fond of his child, she did not really come much into his life. That was

perhaps why Anna had never imagined that the quiet, sudden vanishing of this absorbed and studious man would produce such drastic and painful consequences, cutting as it were her own life in two.

Countess Selvi and Benedetto and old Francesca and her son Italo were all at the station to witness the departure of Anna with Mrs. Nugent. Anna looked very pale in her new mourning, but she was perfectly controlled, even in that difficult moment when she said good-bye to old Francesca, who had been with her since she was born and was like a mother to her. In fact she looked rather stunned and non-comprehending. The train moved off, and soon she and her aunt were on their way to Genoa and London, and the new life which in its almost sinister strangeness and novelty Anna Nugent secretly dreaded. . . .

On the London platform, when the train drew up, Anna saw a tall young man coming swiftly and eagerly toward them. She thought he had a look of her father, as he approached, with his rather thin grave face, his dark hair and violet blue eyes. He kissed Mrs. Nugent, and held out his hand to Anna.

"I'm Michael," he said, with a sudden smile that lit up his face. "We've been looking forward to your coming. I don't suppose you've ever been in London, have you? I think you'll like it when you get used to it."

He made her feel at home with his kind genial voice. It was that slight resemblance to her father, perhaps, that made him seem not quite like a stranger.

"I daresay Anna's tired," said Mrs. Nugent. "I know I am. The sea was very rough, and I couldn't get a private cabin. Your father ought to have reserved one."

"There wasn't time," said Michael; "you see, we only knew for certain you were coming to-day when we got your wire this morning."

They followed him to a large, sumptuous motor-car that stood just outside the entrance to the station. Soon they were driving as rapidly as the congested traffic would permit toward the Nugents' great house in Lancaster Gate. It was a mild spring day, and a soft mist blurred the distance. Once Anna saw an almond tree in full bloom, daintily pink against a gray and brown background. It reminded her of Italy, and she felt what the Italians call a "tightening of the heart."

When Anna Nugent looked back upon the Villa Caterina she always saw bright pink roses painted in almost incredible clusters against a blue sky and sea that were equally impossible to believe in when thus visualized from the great London house whither Mrs. Nugent had borne her off. The house was so high—so immensely high—and her own room was so nearly at the top of it, that when she looked out of the window her eyes were nearly on a level with the higher branches of the trees in the Park, that lay just across the broad width of road. The rumble of the traffic below became curiously muffled and as it were attenuated by distance, indeterminate too, as if it proceeded from sounds that were being perpetually merged into other sounds in different keys. There was a kind of rough music in it, but she could hardly tell if the resulting clash were harmony or discord.

The pink roses and the blue sky and sea belonged to that happy period of her life which had just terminated so abruptly. It was sometimes as difficult to believe in the existence of that other Anna Nugent as to believe that the pink and blue had really happened. Just like that—you could go to the window

any morning in May, and perhaps even well into June if the heat hadn't set in too early, and gaze your fill at the pure color of it all. The mountains painted like pale pansies. . . . The Bay sparkling with points of light that looked like diamonds. . . . The olives made silver instead of gold, in a land where the sun turns most things to a pure brilliancy of gold. . . . The sea, and the gaily painted little boats, green, blue or scarlet, with oars to match. . . . The white butterfly sails. . . . The children shouting and playing on the strip of beach. Night, with the fireflies dancing and flashing among the Madonna lilies and the tall gray thickets of oleander that seldom began to blossom till the fireflies had disappeared. Then the Italian voices that went by so late, singing, singing . . . beautiful, untrained tenors, easy, effective, unconscious of their own power and marvelous sweetness, flinging out gay, operatic airs to the stars, as if it were part of the people's education to know their own operas by heart. Snatches of those songs used to echo in Anna's brain long after she had slipped noiselessly into her appointed and carefully prepared place in this strange, unfamiliar London house.

Everyone was extremely kind to her. Athelstan Nugent welcomed her in his pleasant abrupt half-whimsical fashion, and felt glad that he was able to do something for "poor old Temple's child." Mrs. Nugent, who was always good-nature itself where children and young people were concerned, was delighted to find that Anna was so presentable. She had been afraid of all sorts of things—one never knew with foreigners! Anna, for fear of hurting her aunt's feelings, had sedulously concealed from her her intense unwillingness to leave the Villa Caterina and make that long and dark journey into the unknown. But she had slipped out very early that

morning of her departure to say good-bye to her flowers, the great pines, the ilex-trees, the blossoming wisteria. She could almost hear them telling each other that they were thankful *they* had no aunts to come and fetch them ruthlessly away. They were here forever till they died. . . .

Michael had made friends with Anna at once, slightly to his mother's astonishment, for as a rule he took little notice of girls of any age. But he had liked her from the first. Perhaps he was able to discern a kindred spirit lurking behind those grave bright gray eyes. There was something of the Nugent in Anna. She was charming to look at, and much less un-English than he had expected. She adapted herself without apparent difficulty to her new life. But there were many things she must surely miss, and his imagination taught him that in these new surroundings she must, for a time at least, inevitably suffer from those twin miseries, loneliness and nostalgia. This London life would be so utterly different from anything she had hitherto known. He was determined to do all he could to help her over this bad, rough bit of the road. Even before he saw her, he had made up his mind to do this, but his first glimpse of that rather pale and sweet face, not so very immature or childlike, had made his self-imposed task seem all the more easy and agreeable.

Mrs. Nugent was not blind to these efforts on the part of Michael. But she was inclined to wonder at his taking so much trouble to make Anna feel happy and at home. It was unlike him to notice a little girl. Anna was graceful, and not at all self-conscious, but she had nothing of the forward ease and assurance of the modern flapper—her Italian bringing up had effectually prevented that.

It was Michael who always escorted her to church on Sundays, but he had never anticipated any enjoy-

ment from this duty, which, for some reason never explained to him, had devolved upon him. When he returned to Oxford after Easter, Mrs. Nugent deputed her own elderly maid, Black, to fill the vacant office. "Only for a few weeks," she said, for she read signs of resentment and rebellion upon that faithful Baptist countenance. It was Michael's last year at Oxford, and after that he was to go, not too willingly, into the office of Patton and Nugent. As the eldest son, it was an almost inevitable destiny, and no one dreamed that Michael had any secret literary ambitions, quite unconnected with the activities of the firm.

Anna was unaware that all through that first summer she spent in London, he gave up many a game of golf so as to be free to escort her to Mass. But he liked to walk through the quiet, hushed streets with her, and it was a pleasure to visit all the great London churches in her company—the Cathedral at Westminster; the Oratory at Brompton; the Carmelite church on Campden Hill; the Italian church in Hatton Garden—most homelike to her of all, and where she could not resist talking to some of the poorer and more ragged Italians as she came out; the Jesuit church of the Immaculate Conception at Farm Street, so surprisingly tucked away in the midst of that Mayfair mews. The order that prevailed in them all astonished Anna, who was accustomed to the Italian cathedrals and churches, where people picked up a chair or a prie-dieu—if they were lucky enough to find either of those things—and put it wherever they chose. These orderly lines of benches and chairs, she concluded, formed part of the essential organization that characterized England, where so little was left to chance, and where the Countess had once informed her everything was *bensistemato*.

Michael knew nothing of Catholicism; his mode of life had never led him to trouble particularly about religious matters. But from the first the externals attracted him—the music, the incense, the mystical atmosphere, saturated with something which he did not quite grasp but which he supposed must form part of the traditional glamour of Rome. He liked, too, to watch his cousin's face—such a pure, perfect little face in its setting of honey-colored hair, that hung loose and thick and wavy to her shoulders; he liked the grave look in her gray shining eyes, her demeanor at once so easy and so reverent. He had little experience of girls, and was in truth somewhat afraid of them. His own sister before her marriage had been as unlike Anna as possible. But there was something in this lonely child that insensibly attracted and interested him.

The sermons they heard were full of perfectly plain dogmatic teaching. They were not, as he soon realized, merely the opinions and beliefs of the priest who was speaking. They were of sterner stuff than that, for behind those emphatic words lay the immutable, authentic teaching and authority of the Catholic Church. Michael listened, dreadfully afraid at first of being bored, as are the majority of Englishmen in the presence of a sermon from which they cannot escape, but soon becoming interesting and intrigued by what he heard. Here was something about which his ignorance was complete, and he envied Anna's knowledge of and familiarity with those ceremonies and doctrines which were still a closed book to him.

"You might tell me the name of your prayer-book," Michael said to her one July morning, as they were starting forth across the Park to go to Westminster Cathedral. They both liked the Cathedral,

with its great dim spaciousness, the unearthly sweet-  
ness of its music.

"It's the Roman Missal," said Anna. "This one  
belonged to my father—it's in English and Latin."

"Do you know Latin?" he asked.

"Not very well, but enough to follow."

They were a little early, so Michael led the way to two chairs under some trees in order that he might examine the book. He was beginning to dislike the sense of not understanding, of not being able to follow or quite realize what it was all about. One might just as well know what was going on. Anna, young as she was, had a thorough understanding of these things; her replies to his occasional questions were simple and lucid. Why was it he had been content to remain so long in ignorance of something which, while lying outside his own beat, was yet of such paramount importance to millions of people all over the world?

"I can lend it to you, if you like," she said. "I  
can follow all right without a book."

"Well, just for to-day, and then I must buy one  
for myself," he said, a little reluctantly. He went on  
reading. Those beautiful prayers attracted him—  
they were at once so simple, so logical, and so sublime.

Presently he slipped the book into his pocket, and they continued their walk in silence. It was very beautiful in the Park then, for the rhododendrons were not over, and made patches of vivid flame-color and silvery whiteness. Trees and grass were brilliantly green, and there were wonderful flowers blossoming in the brown earth beds.

When they were in the Cathedral she saw Michael take the book from his pocket and begin to read. Once he turned to her questioningly, as if half ashamed to reveal his ignorance. But she took the book, found the place for him, and gave it back to

him with a very serious beautiful look on her face.

It was strange to her to think that these cousins of hers were Protestants. She had never before been associated with Protestants. Countess Selvi and Benedetto, who were her most intimate friends, were ardent Catholics. In Italy, old Francesca had taken her to Mass nearly every day of her life, for she invariably went to the Cathedral on her way to market to accomplish the daily *spese*.

Anna said something of this to Michael on their way home.

"Oh, do you miss that?" he said. "I'm sure I could take you sometimes on week-days if you want to go. But it'll have to be early so as not to interfere with other things."

"And I like to go early best," she answered. "You see I've often wanted to do so in order to receive Holy Communion. We have to do that fasting, you know."

She made the suggestion timidly, for it had long been in her mind, and she had not liked to utter it. Michael's kindness had thawed something of her *reserve*. She had begun to feel that he was a friend, wise, sympathetic and understanding. But it would perhaps be very inconvenient for him to get up early on purpose to take her to Mass, and she had hesitated before uttering the words. It was only his kindness that made it possible; and as she looked up at his thin, slightly austere face with its dark hair, deep violet eyes and rare smile, all fear of him left her.

"But of course I'll take you," said Michael, "whenever you like—whenever you feel that you want to go."

Religion evidently meant a great deal to her, as he supposed that it did to all Catholics. It wasn't a disagreeable duty imposed upon her by her elders;

it was something that played its own supremely important part in her life, something that she herself urgently desired and perhaps greatly loved.

"You wouldn't mind?" she said.

"Mind? Of course not! I should only mind perhaps in the way of envying you . . . your great possession." His voice held an odd constrained sound as if he were repressing some deep inward emotion that had suddenly agitated him.

He knew now that he envied Anna, yes, and envied these hundreds of Catholics whom he had seen attending Mass that morning. They belonged, they were in it, they weren't only attentive, reverent spectators or idle lookers-on. Some words echoed in his brain, teasing him with their strange reiteration: "*Thou hast the words of Eternal Life. . . .*" Those words had been uttered by St. Peter at a moment when the faith of the disciples had been put to a fiery test before which all Protestants avowedly failed. But he dimly felt that the words that had been spoken to Christ could be said of the Catholic Church to-day. Her visible strength and absolute unity, her central, divinely-bestowed authority had made its first appeal to him.

"I meant to ask Aunt Juliet, but I wasn't sure if she would understand," said Anna.

"Oh, I'll explain it all to her. You're to be absolutely free, you know, to practice your religion while you're with us. Your father's will stipulated that, so if you ever want anything that we haven't thought of giving you, you must just say so. I'm afraid," and he smiled a little wryly, "that you'll find us about as ignorant as any family could possibly be. It just hasn't come into our lives. People in England are still a little bit afraid of Catholicism."

He thought then that a Catholic could hardly have found herself in surroundings where such a large

degree of tolerance and indifference was displayed. The Nugents belonged to no extreme party of the Church of England; they went to church when they felt inclined, and never when they did not. They liked to hear good music, a famous preacher, but they were quite without enthusiasm. The slightest shower of rain sufficed to keep them from attending a Sunday morning service in an Anglican church. On the whole, their sympathies tended slightly toward the moderately Broad church party. It entailed less effort, and coincided with their own spirit of tolerance. It was so much more pleasant to be assured that there was no hell, that miracles didn't happen, and that dogmas were things of the past in the light of modern scientific discoveries, and therefore they chose this line of least resistance. Ritualism perplexed them and Evangelicalism depressed them, and the more liberal views expounded by a certain Mr. Tomlinson-Smith who frequently dined at Lancaster Gate constituted a *via media* between these two more stringent attitudes.

Michael and Anna left the house early one morning. Only some of the under-servants were astir, and they encountered a sleepy, astonished and slightly resentful housemaid dusting the hall. Outside, a fresh wind, flower-scented, blew from the Park, and the air was extraordinarily pure, as it is even in London before the busy traffic pollutes it with dust and odors of gasoline.

There were not many people about on foot, but the heavy omnibuses were laden with workmen and girls going to the scene of their daily tasks.

Michael hailed a passing taxi. He didn't want Anna to walk so far fasting. They were going to Farm Street—he did not quite know then why she had expressed a preference for that church.

It was pleasant to find themselves spinning along

the quiet, half-empty streets, the soft wind blowing in their faces.

A strange feeling of excitement possessed Michael. He felt that in some obscure way he was going to learn through Anna something more definite about the Catholic Church. And the thought intrigued him. He wondered that she could look so calm and composed. She was silent and thoughtful, and he did not talk to her, because he felt that she must be silently preparing for that solemn and mystical moment.

But there were many things he would have liked to ask her. He would have liked to question her closely. There were things that from her own fruitful spiritual experience as a Catholic she could certainly have told him.

They entered the church. At that hour it was filled with a gray dusk starred by sudden golden patches of illumination from the numerous lamps and candles that burned before the altars. The gloom was a little thick, as if from some past smoke of incense, and there was a faint fragrance of incense still lingering there. It wasn't a large and imposing church like the Oratory or Westminster Cathedral, but it had an atmosphere that Michael supposed would be called devotional.

Anna left her books and little bag beside him on the bench, and he saw her go up to a confessional a little distance away and kneel down with her face bent toward the grating. For a moment he stared at her stupefied. He had never to his knowledge seen anyone in the act of going to confession before. But, of course, he ought to have known that was what she would want to do. Perhaps it was the first time she had had the opportunity since coming to London. She seemed timid about asking for anything, was afraid of giving trouble or inconveniencing

someone. And certainly no one would ever have thought of suggesting such a thing as this to Anna. She was free to practice her religion, but she had to look after herself in the matter. There was no one in the house to advise or counsel her, or to see that she punctually discharged her religious duties. Yes, she was left to herself—this child of fourteen! Surely she must need guidance. All at once he thought of her spiritual solitude and isolation with something of terror. He felt that he wanted to remedy it. He thought of her—the only Catholic in that great house. Dependent, too, almost wholly upon himself to help her in the matter. If she hadn't been devout, he could imagine that coming to them at such a critical age, finding herself thus alone and without guidance, she might have drifted away altogether.

And now, at the first opportunity, she had quietly gone to confession. He hadn't somehow connected her with that part of it. He knew, of course, that Catholics were bound to approach that sacrament and seek the pardon and absolution that it could bestow. But how could she go like that—so simply, so unself-consciously, so as a matter of course? He could not see her now. She had gone to the side of the confessional that was farthest away from him. She was lost in the shadows.

All of a sudden he had that feeling of violent repugnance which many people experience when they first closely envisage the sacrament of Penance. And it seemed to him unjustifiable, an infringement of individual rights. . . . That was why, perhaps, the Catholic Church had sometimes been called the enemy of liberty. She claimed this peculiar ascendancy over men, so that they had to reveal to her the evil thoughts of their hearts, their idle words, their sins of the flesh, their failures, their rebellion against the laws

of Almighty God. And as he meditated upon this aspect of the Church he said to himself: "I couldn't do that. No Englishman could." It didn't seem fair or just that men should be compelled to submit to such personal humiliation in order to obtain from the Church her great and transcendent spiritual gifts.

And then he saw Anna approaching, returning to her seat. Her face was not very clearly visible under the cloche-shaped hat she was wearing, but just before she knelt down she turned to him and smiled—almost gratefully, he thought. She looked very calm and happy and quite beautiful. He had never before been so struck with the spiritual quality of her beauty. She was little more than a child, but in some ways she was extraordinarily mature. And it was her religion that had given her this wisdom, this maturity.

She was kneeling now, her face hidden in her hands. . . .

For Anna, with her little tale of innocent sins, the confessional might be all right. For children—yes, he could imagine it as being a salutary and wholesome process for many children. But for older people it was surely an insupportable discipline. Most grown men and women, even the best of them, had something in their lives of which they were ashamed and which they would prefer not to reveal. Even if they had escaped the grosser sins there must be at least some act of meanness, of lying, of cowardice or jealousy, of cruelty or anger, that had left, as it were, a smudge upon the soul. Michael passed hastily in review his own boyhood, his school and college days. It was terrible—even this rehearsal, this voluntary examination of conscience revealing in a flash just where he had failed. Were these sins—trifling in many people's eyes—still staining his soul? Wasn't a deep heartfelt repentance sufficient? For others, perhaps, but not for the children of the

Church. She imposed upon them this formality with all its subtle humiliation. Only at the hour of death, if no priestly help or ghostly counsel was at hand, a fervent act of contrition was held to suffice. He realized then that if he ever determined to become a Catholic—and lately he had often found himself toying with the idea—he would have to go as Anna had just gone and reveal those shortcomings, those intimate failures, to a priest in the confessional. And then they would be forgiven.

He thought—as many non-Catholics have thought—that that would be too high a price to pay. . . .

He knelt during the Mass that followed, but all the time his mind was persecuted with these thoughts. He felt disturbed and restless. If it had not been his duty to take Anna home, he would certainly have left the church. The very atmosphere deepened his suffering. He seemed to be looking across a dark gulf to some strangely-shining light.

And presently Anna rose again, left his side, and with folded hands went up to the altar rail.

That stabbed him afresh. He wanted passionately to receive the Blessed Sacrament in Holy Communion. He was not one of those who refused to accept those terrible and awe-inspiring, yet divinely sweet words—the Words of Eternal Life. Was he a coward, then, that he could not face that dark gulf and make the required payment? Men, women and little children were crowding up to the altar now. All these had paid their debt. And at that moment his own isolation and detachment seemed to him insupportable.

His face as they drove home was rigid and set, and Anna was afraid that he was bored at being dragged out so early. She little guessed the storm of emotion that was overwhelming him.

When they entered the dining-room, Athelstan and his wife were already seated at breakfast.

"Been out?" asked Mrs. Nugent.

"Yes. I took Anna to church. I hope we're not late—we drove back."

"Oh, no, you're not late," said Mrs. Nugent, beginning to pour out coffee for them both. She looked at Michael rather curiously. He was not looking quite himself this morning. Perhaps he hadn't wanted to get up so early.

After breakfast, when Anna had gone upstairs, she said to him:

"You mustn't let dear little Anna make a slave of you. But in any case it won't be for very long. When we return from Scotland I've got a nice young Catholic governess coming. She'll see to all that. Her name is Miss Lawton, and Mrs. Phipps-Moxon tells me she is really quite an exceptional person."

Michael felt a little disappointed to hear this. He supposed that when this Miss Lawton came he wouldn't be wanted to take Anna to Mass any more. Of course, he could always go alone. But he felt he should miss having that quiet devout little figure kneeling near him, so strangely absorbed and recollected.

## CHAPTER II

### THE COMING AND GOING OF GAY LAWTON

#### I

ANNA'S previous experience of governesses had been restricted to vociferous and voluble Italian ladies who had taught her to read and write their language, and do a little simple arithmetic. Later on, as she grew older, this had been supplemented by a certain amount of geography, and the history of Ancient Rome. She had also read the whole of the *Divina Commedia* with explanatory text.

Miss Lawton, fresh from Oxford, and awaiting a suitable post, came to the Nugents' house in Lancaster Gate that autumn to continue the work begun by those well-intentioned ladies. After a few days' practical experience in her new job, she declared that she hadn't believed it was possible for a girl of fourteen to be as ignorant as Anna was.

Gay Lawton had never been ignorant; her eldest brother had seen to that. She had been the only girl in a family of brilliant sons, and she was naturally almost as clever as they were. They were poor, and had early been taught that they had nothing to look to in the future but their own exertions. They had discovered the truth of this ominous warning on the death of their parents within a few months of each other.

Anna took to Miss Lawton at once. She was a

big girl with a boyish, rather slouching, thin figure, a small dark face with bright keen brown eyes, smooth black hair, and a very decided manner.

"Very independent," Mrs. Nugent had murmured after their first interview. She had never had anything to do with modern highly-educated women who worked for their living just as their brothers did. Gay was twenty-two and looked more; she gave one the idea of being almost fantastically competent and efficient. Mrs. Nugent formed a vague, unspoken wish that she had been less good-looking. The mutual friend—Mrs. Phipps-Moxon—who had recommended her had never alluded to that detrimental fact. Mrs. Nugent was always nervous lest one of her sons should fall in love with someone quite "impossible."

During the following year Michael left Oxford and settled down to work in the city in the offices of Patton and Nugent. He had grown up with this goal before his eyes, but it had never seemed to him at all a desirable or attractive one. He almost envied Rodney, who was now in the Army and stationed at Aldershot with the prospect of going to India in the autumn. Not that Michael had any wish for a military career; his one year in the trenches had given him a very profound distaste for anything of the kind. But it would have meant a change of scene, a glimpse of a wider, freer life than London could offer. Besides, he hated business. He wanted to write, and now he would have no time to do so. His youth, his young fresh years, were to be sacrificed to Patton and Nugent's. It was characteristic of Michael that he kept these rebellious, subversive thoughts to himself, just as he was careful never to reveal his secret ambition to anyone. He did not even tell Anna, though once or twice he had toyed with the idea of doing so. She was such a sweet,

sympathetic little companion, still almost a child and yet with something of a woman's wisdom. . . .

He tried to console himself with the thought that it would certainly mean he would be a rich man in the future. In a few years he would probably be a partner, and eventually he would inherit his father's position. Some day he would be able to marry, and have at least as large and opulent a house as the one in Lancaster Gate, even if his income didn't run to a charming country property as well. It was strange that with all these advantages Michael Nugent should always contemplate his future with a sense of dismayed frustration. It wasn't going to give him what he asked for—what his year of serving his country had made him feel he had a right to ask for. He would look back upon a strenuous day's work and ask himself if it were really worth while. Of course, money was useful, but many other things were far more beautiful and desirable. He could not picture himself as so obviously contented and happy as his father was, in precisely similar circumstances. And fate seemed to be leading him by the nose toward a life that would certainly resemble his father's in every particular.

Anna was more than fifteen now. She was growing tall, though not nearly so tall as Gay, and she was lanky rather than awkward at *l'âge ingrat*. She always looked charming, and Mrs. Nugent was particular about her clothes, and saw that her frocks and hats were replenished as need required, so that she was never shabby, as she had been in the old days of Francesca's economical rule. In term time she was continually with Gay Lawton, though even now Michael often made an excuse for accompanying her to Mass. The two girls were now intimate friends. Anna was ignorant still, but no longer so

woefully ignorant; when a subject interested her she learnt it with avidity. She was always grateful to Gay in after years for disclosing to her the wide and beautiful field of English literature. Especially poetry. . . . It seemed to her almost incredible that one land should have produced in every age such an extraordinary wealth of poetry. Even to-day, for Gay introduced her to a host of living poets, some of whose names, she declared, would always be remembered. "We've no right to neglect contemporary thought," she used to say.

And Anna read the *Divina Commedia* with Gay, who—she was astonished to find—had never read it, scarcely realizing that, in her turn, she was teaching her Italian, for it was Anna who read it with her pure, pretty accent, and Gay who followed each canto in English and read the arguments and explanations aloud.

Anna felt that Gay had opened the door into a new world for her. She developed something of her father's love for books. And it was lovely to find that Michael cared for them passionately, too. It made a bond of sympathy between them. She often discussed with him what she had been reading with Gay.

One day, when they were walking across to the Cathedral at an hour which Gay considered inhumanly early, he made a confession to Anna.

"When I was at Oxford I made up my mind I'd write. But going into the firm has knocked that on the head."

"Oh, couldn't you choose?"

He shook his head. "I thought I should be able to, all that year of the War—if I came out alive. But as soon as I got back I saw it was impossible. It'll relieve Dad of a lot of work if I'm there. So I didn't say anything."

"Perhaps some day you'll have time," she said, suddenly pitying him.

"Not likely. I'm dog-tired when I get home at night. . . ."

And they continued their walk in silence.

## 2

Mrs. Nugent had a sharp attack of influenza that winter, and her illness synchronized with Rodney's arrival on leave. He was to go to India early in the new year, and would be away some time. They were all sorry that the house should be so dismal, for it was an unwritten tradition that Rodney, when he was at home, should be amused and pampered as much as possible. He hadn't wanted to come, either. He had wanted to spend his last weeks in England with May at Wakebourne, where he could have had some hunting. He was rather sulky when he arrived, because his father had insisted that he should spend Christmas with them in Lancaster Gate.

Gay had remained there all through the Christmas holidays. Anna had begged that she might be allowed to do so, having ascertained that she had nowhere to go. She was trying, too, to obtain a big post in a girls' college in one of the colonies, so it was rather necessary that she should be on the spot to interview people.

After a few days, Rodney formed the habit of coming up to the schoolroom, which was on the fourth floor. Sometimes he would say carelessly to Anna, "You can go and do your prep in your own room, can't you, Anna?"—and she went away feeling that he wished to get rid of her. She was just a little jealous because Gay was so friendly to him.

"Decent kid, that," she heard him murmur once before she was well out of the room; "knows when she isn't wanted. May would never have gone,"

Although the holidays had begun, Gay made her do a few hours' lessons every day. The weather was bad, and as a rule Anna was glad of the occupation. The lessons, too, consisted of reading a number of interesting books, the history of special periods, the lives of eminent authors, and some of Shakespeare's plays.

She had not been very long in her room one evening, when Gay tapped at the door and called her, "Anna—Anna!" in a low voice, as if she did not want anyone else to hear.

"Come in," said Anna, rising.

Gay came into the room. Her face was flushed as if she had scorched it at the fire, her eyes were very bright; they had the furtive quick glance of a bird's.

"You can come back, Anna," she said, Rodney's gone."

It was the first time Anna had ever heard her call him Rodney, and the little fact struck her almost forcibly. She wondered innocently what secret there was between them.

Gay and Anna had supper in the schoolroom, but they nearly always went down to the drawing-room later in the evening. That night they found May there. She was dressed in a wonderful dress of green and silver, and with her beautiful hair, that was nearly as golden as ripe corn, she looked strikingly beautiful. Rodney was not there; perhaps he was smoking with his father. Presently he was to go with May to a dance.

"Well, child," said May, looking up as they came in, "how are you getting on with your lessons?" She was not really interested in Anna's lessons and disliked having to talk to her and Gay, but she knew that they were waiting for her to speak.

Before Anna could answer Gay had struck in with,

"Oh, Anna's all right. We're working in the holidays, too, to make up for lost time."

When she spoke to May her manner was so cool it was scarcely civil. Anna could feel the unspoken antagonism between the two women. She wondered if May knew about Gay's friendship with Rodney and of his frequent visits to the schoolroom.

"You're looking out for a new post, Mamma tells me," May said, turning to Gay.

"Yes, but I don't suppose I shall get it. It's against one being a Catholic," said Gay, with a touch of bitterness.

May said loftily, "Mamma's reference will be very valuable to you. She's so very pleased at all you've done for Anna."

"Ready, May darling?" said Rodney, coming into the room. When his eye fell upon Gay and Anna, he stopped short and looked a trifle confused and shamefaced.

"Oh, is it time to go to this boring old show?" said May, rising languidly. She stood near Rodney under the Venetian chandelier. They were very much alike, tall, fair and very good-looking. Gay had risen, too, and glanced a little enviously at them. May's dress was perfect, and it hung so gracefully upon her slender figure. She was wearing wonderful jewels, and she looked like a young queen. Rodney put his arm about her.

"You look simply top-hole to-night," he told her. "Ching-Chang ought to be here to see you."

He always called his brother-in-law "Ching-Chang."

May only said: "Oh, it's dismal going to dances with one's husband. And Ching won't even learn to dance."

They said good-night to Anna and Gay and went downstairs together, laughing and talking as they

went. In the hall, May stopped and said: "What a great, untidy girl Miss Lawton is! I wonder Mamma engaged her."

They went out into the car that was awaiting them. Rodney was relieved to feel that her comment called for no reply. He sincerely hoped that Anna wasn't a little chatterbox; his friendship with Gay would certainly not be smiled upon by his mother and sister. . . .

## 3

When Mrs. Nugent was better, Rodney came up less and less to the schoolroom. Often he was out with May; they were almost inseparable now when she stayed at her old home. But she would soon be leaving for Devonshire, with trunks and trunks filled with toys for her children's Christmas tree. She was staying a little longer than usual this year, so as to be with Rodney.

One evening, about a week before Christmas, Rodney strolled into the schoolroom where Gay and Anna were reading by the fire. His fair, arrogant face wore a frowning, perturbed look.

"Send that kid away," he said petulantly.

Gay looked up but never moved from her seat. She answered coolly: "She's got to stay here. While she has this cold, Mrs. Nugent says she isn't to sit in her room."

This order was two days old, and had filled Gay with a certain misgiving; she was almost afraid that the reason given wasn't the true one. The servants might have seen Rodney climbing the stairs with his swift long strides. Everything they saw was duly reported to Black.

"Beastly nuisance," grumbled Rodney.

Anna got up and went over to the window seat, which was low and wide. She sat with one shoulder

towards the two figures sitting opposite to each other in arm-chairs by the fire. A curtain half hid her. They talked in low tones, and Anna tried not to listen. She was preparing a history lesson. But tonight the subject failed to absorb her. The battles, the fierce quarrels, the love-affairs of old and dead kings could not win her attention from those two tragic-looking young people, both, in her eyes, so beautiful.

Gay's pert, pretty little face, with its upturned eyes and nose and down-turned discontented little mouth, looked oddly grave. Suddenly Rodney's hand shot out and seized hers.

"Look here—I can't stand this any more! I simply must tell them!"

Her face quivered. "Don't be an ass, Rodney," she said.

"Why, what difference can it make? What can they do?"

"Nothing to you, of course. But they can chuck me out, and that doesn't happen to be convenient to me just now. Try to think of my point of view."

Anna loved Gay, who had a kind, elder-sisterly way with her, humorously affectionate. Now, overhearing some of her speech, she felt that she didn't want her to be "chucked out." And what was it that Rodney was so anxious to tell them?

Then suddenly in the big glass that hung on the opposite wall at the end of the room, she saw a strange little tableau. While she watched it as though her eyes were riveted to the scene, she felt all the time that it was utterly unreal, that it hadn't happened. She saw Rodney hold out his arms as if utterly forgetful of her presence. . . . And Gay got up from her chair and slowly, slowly, went toward him as if she couldn't help herself. The arms were round her now, she bent her head till it was hidden

on his shoulder; their two faces were pressed together. Anna thought that she heard the faint sound of a sob. . . .

But she couldn't bear any more. She stole noiselessly from the room, convinced that they were unaware of her going.

When she reached her own room at the end of the passage, she found that she was trembling. Her knees shook under her. She felt an overmastering excitement. She caught sight of her face in a mirror and saw that she was very pale.

She hoped that Aunt Juliet wouldn't question her.

In imagination she saw Gay eternally getting up and going towards Rodney's outstretched arms like one hypnotized, as a needle goes towards a magnet, impelled by some irresistible, invisible force.

It was cold in her room. The fire had not yet been lit. She went across to the window, for her face was burning, and pressed it against the pane. The window was open a little at the top. Mrs. Nugent had given the order for this when Anna first came, and though the Italian-bred child caught cold after cold and nearly suffocated on foggy nights, this hygienic rule had never been rescinded. But to-night there was no fog. It was one of those clear, breathless, frosty winter nights when the stars burn like pale fire. The air was ice-cold and very still. The trees in the Park were like masses of amorphous darkness against the sky, their little lace edges were scarcely discernible. Far below, the traffic rumbled, and the shrill horn of a motor-car sounded its imperative warning note.

Anna looked out. She wasn't thinking now of Gay and Rodney. She was thinking, in unchildish fashion, of the great city lying, as it were, at her feet, spreading its endless streets and roads and squares for miles and miles over the brown earth. And in

those miles and miles of streets, some broad and opulent, some poor and mean, some so narrow that they seemed to shrink out of sight as if ashamed of their naked, shameful poverty, there were millions and millions of people, old, middle-aged, young, babies. They seemed to Anna then like a great army. Some were happy with glowing eyes . . . like Gay and Rodney. Some were crying, some suffering, some hard at work and very tired. The only thing that held them all together was this common bond of citizenship.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door. She turned sharply, expecting to see Gay. But it was Rodney who appeared, in response to her quivering "Come in!"

"Ugh! How cold! Why didn't you ask to have your fire lit?"

He advanced toward her, his blue eyes shining. All the three Nugents had blue eyes, but while Michael's were dark, almost violet, Rodney's were of a clear, penetrating light blue.

"I suppose you heard what Gay and I were saying?" he inquired, looking down at her.

"Yes," said Anna. She added, as if in self-exculpation: "I tried not to."

"Well, you mustn't let anyone know you know," said Rodney.

"They won't ask me, will they?"

"Well, I hope not. But if they do, you mustn't say you saw me in the schoolroom."

Anna was silent. Supposing Aunt Juliet were to question her in that sleepy, indolent way of hers? She couldn't, wouldn't, lie to Aunt Juliet even to save Gay; she had the feeling, too, that such a process would be futile.

"You see, you would get us into no end of a row. And Gay would have to go."

"Go?"

"Yes. You see, we—Gay and I—care for each other. We want to get married. And she's a Catholic."

"So am I," said Anna, not quite understanding him.

"Well, it's jolly hard on Protestants when they want to marry Catholics!"

Anna pondered over this.

"You might become a Catholic?" she suggested.

"I? Not quite!" said Rodney.

There was a brief silence. The room seemed very hushed and cold.

"We shall have to wait. It'll be rotten—going out to India—leaving Gay."

"I'm sorry," said Anna. "I like Gay, too."

His face broke into a smile. "Yes, she's wonderful, isn't she? Well, Anna, don't give us away, that's all. I always said you were a decent kid. Michael thinks so too." He pulled her awkwardly toward him and kissed her forehead. Then he went out of the room, and she could hear him going down the stairs, two or three at a time, as he always did, with the eager agility of a young animal.

4

Anna smoothed her hair and went along the passage, back to the schoolroom. It was in darkness, and deserted. The fire was nearly out. Gay wasn't there. Anna switched on the electric light, and such was the force of habit that she resumed her history lesson at the very place where she had been so strangely interrupted, concentrating upon her task as if such people as Rodney and Gay didn't exist.

Presently the supper was brought in and shortly afterward Gay appeared. Her head was thrown

back, and her eyes were red-rimmed. She looked defiant and miserable. Anna felt that she was seeing her for the first time, and that it was under a tragic aspect which she had never before associated with her. Why weren't they happy—since they loved each other? What was this nebulous thing they both feared?

There was something very charming about Gay, with her bright dark eyes, her deep husky voice, her tall lank figure.

Generally they talked during supper, but to-night Gay was silent. Perhaps she was thinking of Rodney, dining now with his parents in the big paneled room downstairs. It seemed rather hard on them both that they should be so separated. . . . It was always dull in the dining-room unless there were guests, and to-night there would only be May, because Mrs. Nugent wasn't well enough to receive people as yet. Both Michael and Rodney avoided dining at home as much as possible; they often went to their club together. They were on friendly though not on intimate terms. All the intimacy was between May and Rodney; theirs was a close, firm friendship.

Gay looked up suddenly and said:

"I shall look out for something else if I don't get this colonial job. I simply can't stay here. Rodney and I feel like—thieves."

"Are you afraid Aunt Juliet will find out?" asked Anna, solemnly.

"Find out? What is there for her to find out?"

"About you and Rodney wanting to be married."

In her heart she felt a sudden, odd feeling of relief that it was Rodney and not Michael, little as she was able to understand anyone preferring the younger brother to the elder.

"If she hasn't found out already," said Gay, biting her lip nervously.

Anna went on with her supper. The thought of Aunt Juliet made her nervous. She felt that she had never really seen her fully awake, and she dreaded to confront her aroused from her habitual indolent somnolence. She hoped that she wouldn't come up and question her.

They had finished supper, and one of the servants had come to clear it away in the swift and noiseless manner of the well-trained English domestic. The two girls went back to their old places by the fire. Gay was reading a novel, a little inattentively, to judge by the way in which she constantly looked at the clock and then towards the door as if she were expecting someone. Anna was conscious of this scarcely disguised restlessness, and it affected her also. She could not concentrate upon the book she was reading. Did Gay feel, too, as if something untoward were about to happen? Anna's nerves were a little on edge after the excitement of the evening, and she was startled when the door opened suddenly and May Chingford came into the room.

She was dressed to go out, in a long ermine cloak with a big collar of fluffy white fur. The cloak had slipped back from her shoulders, disclosing a dress of rose-pink, scantily and slenderly made. The skirt was short and revealed her slim ankles and tiny satin-shod feet. Diamonds gleamed at her throat and in her hair.

Anna hardly knew her beautiful cousin. Secretly, in her heart, she cherished a kind of childish worship for her, but it made her silent and very still in her presence, as if she were afraid of attracting her attention. She was ashamed of the feeling, and afraid that May would somehow discover it and laugh at her. She stood up now, with flushed cheeks and downcast eyes, looking like a guilty child.

May bestowed a swift, humorous glance upon

her. "Well, my child, don't look so scared; I'm not going to eat you! But it's Miss Lawton who has got to be eaten." She turned to Gay, and, though she was still smiling, there was something almost terribly powerful in her aspect. The power of Lady Chingford, beautiful and assured, over Gay Lawton. "Rodney's let it all out. He's never had a secret from me in his life. Mamma hates scenes, as you know, and just now they're bad for her heart. So I promised to act as deputy." Her blue eyes were hard and bright, and behind her ironic manner one detected anger. . . . "Well, Miss Lawton, you knew you were taking risks, and Rodney isn't even of age! Mrs. Phipps-Moxon told me that when she recommended you to Mamma she especially warned you against flirting with the dear, darling boys!"

Gay stood there very still. Not a muscle of her face moved. She hardly looked at Lady Chingford. Anna trembled violently. There was to her something almost terrible in the little scene. Her idol seemed to have suddenly lost something of its peerless, flawless whiteness. It was as if she had realized that it was a thing of marble, hard and brilliant and beautiful, but not made of flesh and blood. May was hurting Gay. And Gay stood there, bearing the blows without flinching, without crying out. Perhaps May didn't know how much she was hurting her. Perhaps she didn't realize that she was a penniless girl, without a home, without a father or a mother, completely dependent, too, upon her own exertions for her bread. Just for those reasons Anna felt that May should have been more kind, more considerate. Even if Gay had done wrong in loving Rodney. . . .

"Well, you'll have to go, Miss Lawton. Tomorrow morning as ever is.. Rodney's coming back home with me—we think after all, he'll be safer in Devonshire. I hope this will be a lesson to you for

another time. It was absolutely foolish of you to try and catch poor Rodney. And Anna, what do you know about it, you sly little puss?" She went up to the girl, put her hand under her chin and lifted her face sharply so that the light fell full upon it. There was something cruel in the little action and Anna's eyes filled with tears. "You want a whipping for not telling Mamma what was going on. Well, good-night, both of you. You must be out of the house before ten o'clock to-morrow morning, Miss Lawton. Whatever's owing to you shall be sent up to your room."

She went out of the room, swishing her silken skirts. She was almost exaggeratedly thin, and in her scanty short skirts she looked like a young girl.

Anna felt a violent revulsion; she almost hated May. How could people be so deliberately cruel? It hardly seemed possible that one could pass, as Anna felt she had done, in the space of a few minutes from a shy worshiping love to a black anger that seemed almost like hatred. To see Gay hurt like that—Gay, so proud, so immovable, so silent—had made Anna feel wicked.

Gay was standing near the mantelpiece, her face averted. Anna went timidly up to her and laid her hand on her arm with a vague desire to comfort her, to assure her at least of her sympathy. "Gay—" she said.

"Oh, leave me alone, you little fool!" said Gay, angrily, pushing her away. Her cheeks were flaming now, and the tears stung her eyes.

To-morrow—at ten o'clock. . . . Where on earth was she to go to? Mrs. Nugent wouldn't be likely to give her a reference now. She had been there nearly fifteen months—all wasted time. . . . And it was Rodney himself who had betrayed their secret,

She might have known he would blurt it all out to the sister he so adored.

Anna stole back to her seat. The sharp words, the impatient gesture, had not disconcerted her. Child as she was, she knew they were not only, or even principally, directed against herself. They all formed part of this incredible little drama of which she had been an unwilling but deeply interested witness. She reflected that she knew more about it than anyone, except the two principal actors who were both, so she imagined, in such disgrace. Suppose even now they were to question her to discover the extent of her knowledge? May had seemed to take it for granted that she was somehow an accessory. . . .

Gay sat down near the table and leaned her elbows upon it. She made a cup for her face with her long slim hands. When she looked up at last, Anna saw that the angry flush had died away, leaving her face cold and pale.

"I shan't know where to go," she said, helplessly, almost like a child confronted with sudden homelessness. "You see I haven't anyone in England and I'd counted on staying here till I could get something permanent."

"You could go to a hotel," suggested Anna.

From her childish experience of Italy she knew that hotels were invariably ready to receive the homeless.

Gay laughed rather bitterly.

"Hotels cost money, my child."

It meant, then, what she had always suspected, that Gay was really poor. Anna thought of her money-box upstairs, her Savings Bank book into which sums of one pound and upwards were faithfully lodged. She never had much money, but "tips" on birthdays and at Christmas were always forthcom-

ing. Once Michael had given her a pound—she had put that carefully away into the money-box, hoping that she might never be obliged to spend anything so precious. There were some loose shillings besides, but the gold sovereign was the only one she had ever seen, and it was Michael's gift too, so that it was a treasure. With an effort she resolved to give it to Gay. Braving a second rebuff she approached her again.

"I've got about two pounds in my room," she said. "I'd like you to have it." In her heart there was a childish desire to make amends for May's cruelty.

Gay looked at her, put out her hand and drew Anna to her.

"Rodney was right," she said steadily; "you're a jolly decent little kid. I'm sorry to go away from you." She touched Anna's white forehead with her lips. "But I can't take your money, Baby."

She rose, shook herself and laughed. Her momentary collapse was over; she was once more her bright, hard, courageous self.

"Come and help me pack," she said.

Anna followed her into her bedroom, which was opposite her own. Gay's wardrobe, for all that her appearance was so invariably neat, was scanty. None of the dresses she now proceeded to fold carefully looked new. The blouses were clean and fresh, and everything was well cared for. Gay had few possessions beyond her personal things, just a few books and some writing materials. Her small trunk and suit-case were soon packed.

"Not much, is it?" she said; "but people don't like it if you come with big trunks. You'd soon find that out if you ever tried to teach."

She was cheerful in the midst of adversity—perhaps she still hoped that Rody. . . . But no; his

readiness to depart with May on the morrow showed at least a not too great unwillingness to be rescued from a situation that promised such complications.

"I wonder what I shall do?"

Anna, secretly admiring her pluck, her invincible grit, said hastily: "Oh, as soon as I'm grown up I mean to go back to Sant' Elena to the Villa Caterina. It's mine, you know—they've let it till I'm old enough to live there. Wouldn't it be lovely to be there together, Gay, just you and I?"

"It's a very pretty castle in the air, but you're only fifteen, Anna, and that isn't much use to us now."

"Perhaps you'll marry Rodney. . . ."

"Perhaps I shan't." Instantly her face grew hard. She had been in the Nugents' house quite long enough to realize how completely May governed and ruled Rodney. He was as wax in her hands. And May, so to speak, had turned her thumbs down. Gay was to be sacrificed, and it didn't really matter what became of her, so long as she was safely removed from his vicinity.

"You must go to bed now, Anna," she said. "It's long past ten. I think we'll say good-bye now—I shall go off as early as possible, and I hate saying good-bye."

She took Anna's face in her two cold little hands and kissed her lightly, deliberately, several times.

Anna said slowly, "I love you, Gay." She wanted Gay to know how dreadfully sorry she was.

And Gay did not laugh, as Anna had been half afraid she would. Instead she stooped and repeated the embrace.

## CHAPTER III

### EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD

#### I

THIS episode marked an epoch in the child's development. It startled her out of the lassitude that had come upon her in England, amid circumstances at once so strange and unfamiliar. During that first year in Lancaster Gate she had sometimes felt like a little machine that rose at a certain hour, breakfasted, worked at a number of bewildering lessons for which she felt she had no aptitude, ate meals at fixed intervals, walked out, and attended classes in dancing and drawing. She had adapted herself to it all with many an interior struggle but with no evidence of rebellion. She was just caught up into the limitless regularity of a thoroughly well-organized English household. And the very fact of leaving her beloved Italian home had numbed her. It did not seem to matter much what the new life held for her since it could no longer hold Sant' Elena and the Villa Caterina. Anna had always been docile; her disposition was sweet and yielding, and she had submitted to the strict unvarying régime, including the total lack of freedom and solitude, without remonstrance. Her one great pleasure had been to go to Mass with Michael, to discuss her Faith with him afterward, since he was such an eager, sympathetic listener, and to talk to him about Italy and old Francesca, and Countess Selvi and her son.

Gay's coming had changed that, since it was really part of her duty to escort Anna to Mass, and the girl had seen less of Michael in consequence. But there was much in Gay's companionship to compensate for this loss. Lessons with her seemed to shed their bewildering perplexity. And Anna had learned to love this bright, charming girl who might have been her elder sister. Brilliant, courageous and impulsive, Gay stood for something that Anna could admire and appreciate because it was so utterly strange and new to her. She felt, child as she was, that she could never be the same as if she had not known Gay. And she could not see why these two brilliant, eminently lovable beings, Rodney and Gay, shouldn't fall in love with each other and marry if they chose. They seemed, in her eyes, ideally suited. But the episode, so full of promise in its charming and romantic beginnings, had ended dramatically, almost tragically. Gay Lawton's departure had bruised her by its tragic reality. In imagination, Anna could always visualize May Chingford standing there speaking in that cruel smiling way; she could recover, too, the trembling thrill that had made her own body shiver from head to foot as she listened. She realized that the Nugents would try to prevent Gay from ever seeing Rodney again. It was Gay who had to suffer.

When Anna came into the dining-room to breakfast on the following morning, she knew that Gay had gone. She had heard a taxi drive up at eight o'clock and had seen it go away again with Gay's modest luggage piled up beside the chauffeur. She had burst out crying afresh, and her eyes were still scarlet and swollen when she came into the room.

Only Mr. and Mrs. Nugent were present. May breakfasted in her room, and Michael often had his early, so as to take a walk or ride before going down

to the city. Mrs. Nugent was at the irritable stage of convalescence and seeing Anna's tearful aspect she said peevishly:

"What are you crying for? I really can't have you here when you look like that—it upsets me. Go back to the schoolroom and I'll have your breakfast sent up to you."

"Very well, Aunt Juliet," said Anna. She went out of the room, with a lump in her throat that threatened to choke her.

"This comes," said Mrs. Nugent to her husband, "of having a young Roman Catholic governess in the house. I never quite liked Miss Lawton although Mrs. Phipps-Moxon did give me such a glowing account of her. She had such a very independent manner, and I'm sure she was acquiring far too great an influence over Anna."

"Poor Anna—she seems upset at losing her," said Athelstan, always good-natured and ready to make allowances for human weakness. He couldn't see any harm in Miss Lawton himself. Good-looking girl with plenty of brains—quite a modern type. And Rodney had always been foolish about girls; there was no harm in that. He wasn't cool and steady-going like old Michael, who always seemed so much older and wiser than his twenty-three years.

Athelstan had not been allowed to feel much of last night's storm. It was no use disturbing him, May alleged; she could manage the whole thing perfectly without anyone's help, and her father need only know when it was all over. She moved her pawns with an adroit skill. By eight o'clock Gay had left the house, and that same day a sulky yet half-relieved Rodney was traveling down to Devonshire with his sister. May was happily unaware that he had bribed a housemaid to give Miss Lawton a letter before she left. It was couched in extremely foolish terms, and

arranged a place and date of meeting before his departure for Bombay.

Anna was left to her own devices that day. Black, her aunt's maid, looked in at intervals in obedience to instructions to keep an eye on her. She even offered to take her for a walk, but Anna shook her head at the suggestion. The day was uninviting; the streets were wet and slippery from the rain that had fallen persistently all the morning, and a chill, unpleasant wind was blowing.

Her mind revolved continually around this problem to which there seemed no solution, since the Nugents apparently would have nothing of Gay, and had abruptly terminated her brief romance. Anna wondered on the whole that she should have taken it all so calmly, accepting the decree of banishment without a murmur. . . .

Anna had holidays during the next few weeks. She enjoyed them when her grief had had time to subside a little. There were delightful days when Michael took her to the play, and seemed to enjoy *Peter Pan* fully as much as she did. He seemed to understand that she was a little lonely now that Gay had gone; and he often took her for a walk, showed her the Tower and the zoo, the British Museum and the National Gallery, declaring that her education was incomplete till she had "done" all these things. Then there were concerts and cinemas, to say nothing of short motor-runs into the country on fine frosty days. Michael exerted himself to amuse her, as if he had suddenly discovered that she must be lonely with no young thing to keep her company, in a house where all were desperately bent upon their own concerns.

"Oh, don't let her bother you, Michael," Mrs. Nugent used to say vaguely. Her own thoughts were completely occupied with Rodney at that

moment. He had returned from Devonshire and would be sailing in about a week. She hoped that he wasn't seeing "that horrid Lawton girl."

There was an exciting Sunday when Michael and Anna encountered Gay and Mrs. Phipps-Moxon in the porch of Westminster Cathedral, just after Mass. The two girls rushed into each other's arms, while Michael exchanged formal greetings with Mrs. Phipps-Moxon, a rich War-widow of American birth, who had known Gay for many years. He was a little afraid that she might revert to the subject of Gay's abrupt dismissal, especially as it was she who had originally recommended her for the post. But she hardly knew Michael, and his cold, formal manner did not encourage speeches of the kind.

"I'm taking Gay around with me till she finds something," she said, in her charming way. "And if nothing turns up she shall come to Nice with me."

"Anna was very sorry to lose Miss Lawton," said Michael, watching the two girls as they stood apart, talking and laughing. Gay was looking quite her best, and as if she had not suffered at all from that recent humiliating defeat. He had hardly ever spoken to her, and then never more than a few conventional phrases, but now his curiosity was stimulated because she was the woman with whom Rodney had fallen very desperately in love. Nor could he doubt that he was still in love with her. He wondered what the outcome would be. Gay was certainly very pretty, and to-day there was a kind of brilliance about her, her eyes were so dark, her sudden smile so flashing, her whole aspect so full of health and intelligence. But Rodney was only twenty—too young perhaps to think of marriage—and Gay was his senior by some years. The whole business had been very unfortunate and particularly hard on Gay. . . .

It was almost a comfort to him to feel that Gay

had this rich, powerful friend to whom she could turn. She wasn't alone and adrift, as he had feared she might be. Anna had revealed to him a little of Gay's circumstances, and it had made him feel slightly anxious.

"Well, we must push off, Anna," he said quietly, and he shook hands with Mrs. Phipps-Moxon and Gay.

Anna was trembling with excitement. Gay had whispered to her, "Oh, Anna darling, it's going to be all right. I've seen him and we've settled to wait till he comes home again. I know you won't give me away, because, of course, no one must know. He's thrown dust in May's eyes. Oh, I'm so happy, Anna!"

All the time she was speaking Anna had felt a queer misgiving because it seemed that her love for Gay and her loyalty to her uncle and aunt were oddly at war. But she was happy too. She felt glad that Gay was with friends. She thought she had never seen her look so beautiful before. Such a bright, dark glowing beauty. . . . She wondered if Michael had noticed it too.

## 2

Rodney had gone to India, and Mrs. Nugent was professedly much upset at parting with him. He hadn't been so pleasant as usual since the affair of Gay Lawton, and though he never referred to it, his mother had the feeling that he bitterly resented the treatment the girl had received. Her grief was, therefore, somewhat strongly tempered with relief.

There was nothing like absence to check these youthful imprudent affairs. Rodney would live to thank her. But he seemed to blame his mother far more than he did his sister, who had really managed

the whole business. Mrs. Nugent felt aggrieved at this. She considered that May ought at least to have shared the blame.

One evening, she went up to the schoolroom, accompanied by an elderly weather-beaten lady.

"Anna," she said, "this is Miss Hall, who will teach you in future. I hope you will try to be very industrious." She smiled at Anna, and thought how much the girl had improved since she came to live with them. She was growing quite tall, and had a straight, slender figure. With her charming face and gray eyes and abundant fair hair, she was really very pretty. And she was never any trouble. No complaints of her ever reached Mrs. Nugent's ears.

She smiled at them both in her fat, sleepy way, and went out of the room.

Miss Hall was a prematurely aged woman of forty who for more than twenty years had been living in other people's houses, teaching other people's children. She was almost worn out, but she knew her work and was deeply conscientious. Anna realized that lessons would never again possess that zest and relish which Gay had imparted to them; nevertheless she liked Miss Hall and was diligent and industrious under her guidance. Miss Hall was delighted to find herself in London with one amenable and charming girl, instead of in the country, where for many years her existence had been embittered by athletic exercises, "nature-study," and the necessity of bicycling from one dull village to another in pursuit of her charges. Anna was an ideal pupil. She moved from task to task, from occupation to occupation with a mechanical, methodical regularity. True, Gay had inspired her with a wish to learn, had unfolded to her the riches that lay within the covers of many books, but then she had imparted to all her lessons a thrilling and romantic interest quite lacking in Miss Hall's

methods. Anna could see Gay, even now, standing there, illustrating her lectures on the blackboard—that quick eager boyish figure, lank and long, the uplifting brown hand, the dark bright eyes, the black hair, all the gipsy brightness of her. . . .

Things settled down again to their normal calm. The waves rolled smoothly over what had been for a brief unpleasant period chaos and confusion. Gay sent Anna postcards sometimes from the South of France, whither she had gone with Mrs. Phipps-Moxon. Rodney was apparently liking India. Michael was more taciturn than ever, going regularly to the city, inwardly resentful, and feeling sometimes like a soul-less machine.

As the years went on, Anna thought less of Sant' Elena. The pain had gone out of those poignant memories of roses and sunshine. Even the brightness of that blue sea and sky had faded a little, had become merged as it were in the gray gloom of London with its ceaseless accompaniment of rumbling sound that was the audible voice of the great city. She didn't hate it any more. She was quite happy there, and sometimes she even began to suspect herself of beginning to love it. Something in its austere charm reminded her of Michael. . . .

One night Athelstan Nugent returned from the city looking unusually tired and worried. As a rule he was uniformly cheerful. At dinner he said suddenly: "I must telephone presently to hear how Patton is."

Mr. Patton was the head of the firm. Anna had seen him, for he came sometimes to luncheon with them, and she never quite knew why she instinctively disliked him. He was a big, black-bearded man with a loud domineering voice, and he repelled her. Mingled with her dislike there was a little fear.

"Is he ill?" she asked.

"Yes—he had a stroke last night. Came on quite suddenly. He was at the office yesterday. He was still unconscious this afternoon."

The news of Mr. Patton's illness cast a little gloom upon them. They each in turn tried to start a new topic of conversation, but in the end they always came back to this particular one. As soon as dinner was over, Mr. Nugent went to the telephone. He seemed almost feverishly eager for news. Patton was the leading spirit in the firm, and the prospect of losing him at rather a critical moment alarmed Athelstan, despite his cheery optimism. There were so many transactions undertaken wholly by Patton of which he himself had no cognizance. He had always meant to ask him for a fuller initiation into the operations of Messrs. Patton and Nugent. As a partner he felt that he had a right to know. But Patton had a rough, unapproachable manner; he disliked being questioned, and he had always contrived to relegate Athelstan to a subordinate position.

But these last years had been highly critical ones for many firms, and the news of Patton's illness just then made Nugent feel anxious and preoccupied. . . .

Presently he came up into the drawing-room, where his wife and Anna were sitting. His face had a queer grayish look.

"My dear Juliet—I've just heard that Patton died at five o'clock without recovering consciousness."

Anna always remembered that little scene. Something in Athelstan's face had chilled her. It even gave her a vague premonition of misfortune. She wondered if Aunt Juliet had noticed anything. But if she did so she made no remark. She only looked up indolently from the novel she was reading and said:

"What a fearful bore for you, Athelstan. I sup-

pose you will be chained to the office more than ever now. But you must get Michael to help you."

She resumed her reading and Athelstan went out of the room.

"If it was only that. . . ." he said.

"Does it make so very much difference to you, Mr. Patton's being dead?" Anna asked Michael on the following Sunday, as they were walking across the Park on their way to the Cathedral.

It was always a joy to her when Michael said at breakfast: "I'll take you to Mass this morning, Anna," and now that she had recently been emancipated from all governesses he seldom failed to accompany her.

She did not yet realize that now it had begun to seem unnatural to him to go to any other church, so completely had he identified himself with Catholic doctrine and teaching. But like many others he was content with this imperfect, superficial relation, not as yet feeling such urgent need for a closer contact, a fuller participation, as to justify himself in taking a definite step toward over-passing certain barriers. Nevertheless he was much more fully informed now upon certain points. He could see the mercy as well as the justice that lay hidden in the sacrament of Penance. As he drew closer indeed, all doubts and difficulties seemed automatically to vanish into thin air.

"I think it will make a very great difference to my father," he said guardedly. "I mean it'll put an awful lot on his shoulders. But I shall help him all I can."

"Michael—I never liked Mr. Patton. He seemed such a bully."

Anna made the confession reluctantly. But Michael only laughed.

"Neither did I! I've felt a brute, though, for being thankful I should never hear his loud voice at the office again. But my father minds it more than I ever thought he would. He's been quite worried—an unusual thing for him—these days."

"I'm sorry for that," said Anna.

They walked on, and suddenly Michael turned to her and said:

"Why, Anna, you've done up your hair!"

Very little of her fair hair showed beneath the hat pulled down nearly to her brows, except the two bright curls that covered her ears.

"Yes. Black did it for me. Do you like it, Michael?"

"Yes. But it makes you look older. Not a child any more."

"I'm nearly eighteen," she said smiling; "you forget I've been here four years."

"Four years," he repeated, "why, it seems only the other day—"

He looked at her. Yes, her head was on a level with his shoulder now. She was of middle height, but looked more because of her little head, the slenderness of her body.

"Soon I shall be able to go back to Sant' Elena," she said.

"Sant' Elena!" he echoed. "I wonder if my mother realizes that you're grown up?"

"I think she must. I go out with her more often than I used to. And I don't have a governess now."

Since Miss Hall left, two years before, there had been a succession of elderly ladies, even less well-favored, who had taken upon themselves the charge of Anna's education. But not one of them had ever usurped Gay's place in her affections. And in her dreams of the Villa Caterina she always saw Gay

with her, in that garden of beautiful flowers on the edge of a sea-washed cliff.

But Gay was still in Australia, teaching in a big college for women, and enjoying the free colonial life. Lately, however, a certain nostalgia had crept into her letters; she sometimes wrote of coming home. She seldom alluded to Rodney now. Anna used to wonder if that romance had perished.

Michael was lost in thought as he walked beside her. She was nearly eighteen, and at that age she would pass from his father's guardianship. She would spread her wings for flight—she would go back to the south. . . .

## 3

A few days later, Athelstan threw a little parcel across the breakfast table into Anna's lap.

"Catch!" he said. He often treated her still as if she were quite a little girl. Michael wasn't the only person in the house who had failed to realize she was growing up.

"Michael's been telling me that you're nearly eighteen," he went on, watching her as she bent her glowing face over the tiny parcel. How pretty she was, with all that soft fair hair framing her face, the delicately penciled dark brows, the shining gray eyes—bright as only young eyes are bright.

She had opened the box, and had discovered within it a row of small milky pearls, very perfect and fastened with a tiny diamond clasp.

"Oh, Uncle Athelstan, thank you!" She looked up, her face smiling with pleasure. "They're sweet!" She clasped them round her neck.

"Well, we must think about your being presented. May might take you to one of the later courts."

"I really don't see any necessity," put in Mrs. Nugent's indolent voice.

"I do. She's my niece."

"Well, I know May's going to present Stella—Lady Wendle's too ill to go. It's no use thinking about Anna this year. Besides, she's too young."

Michael was looking at Anna. Those pearls looked charming against her satin-smooth skin. She made him think of some tranquil landscape at dawn.

"Awful bore being presented, I should think," he remarked lazily.

"Well, she must come out soon," said Athelstan. He had learnt to regard Anna with a kind of proprietary feeling, almost as if she were his own daughter.

"Now she's nearly eighteen, we shall have to think about settling that Sant' Elena business," said Mrs. Nugent.

"Oh, you'd better make up your mind to sell it," said Athelstan, turning to Anna. "It's no use your keeping a big house like that. And I'm told the present tenants are prepared to make an excellent offer."

It wasn't likely, he thought, that Anna would ever wish to return to the Villa Caterina. She must have struck roots here in London. And until she married she could continue to make her home with them.

Anna listened in silence, and some dismay. It seemed to her that he was deliberately, though unconsciously, destroying her long-cherished dream of returning to Italy, and living there with Gay Lawton.

To her intense relief Michael, perhaps divining her thoughts, struck in almost immediately, saying:

"If Anna's got any sense, she won't sell it—she'll go and live there herself!"

The clouds vanished, and she saw again the silver olives, the gold light flowing over land and sea; the

torrents of pink roses; old Francesca, with her dark kind weather-beaten face and wavy iron-gray hair. . . .

"What nonsense, Michael! She could never afford to keep it up on her income," said Mrs. Nugent. "It would be quite a white elephant. She'd better sell it as soon as she's eighteen, and realize the money."

The mention of the Villa Caterina always awakened her to one of her most alert and decided moods. One dreaded those intervals of perspicacity—so Anna's thoughts ran—lest their sudden decisions should be directed against one's most cherished dreams.

"I hope," said Michael, "that she won't be such a little fool."

"Dearest Michael, what do you know about it? You've never seen the place! Not one of the windows shut properly, and as for the doors! And you might just as well be on an island, you're so close to the sea."

"But if it really belongs to me and I may choose," said Anna, her courage stimulated by Michael's support, "I shan't want to sell it. I've always dreamed of going back to live there." Her cheeks flamed with excitement.

"Oh, it's yours, right enough," said Athelstan, "and we can't sell it till you are eighteen because you have to sign the necessary documents. But I'm afraid that you'd never be able to keep it up. Besides, from all accounts it's very much in need of repair."

Michael watched her lazily. He was delighted to discover a strain of Nugent obstinacy in Anna. He could see, too, that his father's arguments had utterly failed to convince her.

Mrs. Nugent sighed.

"Darling Anna is quite ignorant about money.

She's like me—she has no head for figures. You'll have to explain it all to her some day when you've lots of time!"

Anna made up her mind that she would sign no documents that should be drawn up with a view to depriving her of Villa Caterina. It was hers, and she meant to go and live there. The future assumed a rosy aspect, and it was nice, too, to feel that Michael was so strongly on her side. She put up her hand and fingered the pearls that encircled her throat. How wonderful to be eighteen. . . .

After breakfast she went up to the schoolroom, feeling excited and rather rebellious. She stood at the window looking across the Park, where the trees were beginning to offer a sea of pale green fire to the sky. The wide road below was crowded with traffic.

Suddenly the door opened and Michael came into the room. His thin face wore a perplexed look. He was twenty-six now, and looked more. His sedentary London life did not suit him too well, and his heart was even less in his work than it had ever been.

To Anna he seemed almost unimaginably old, but so dear, so understanding. He seldom sought her out in her eyrie at this hour, so that his coming gave her an unexpected sense of pleasure.

"Look here, Anna," he said, "don't listen to them. Stick to your villa. It means such a lot to have your own four walls, and you're jolly lucky to have such nice ones. I'm sure you can live there on very little."

"I don't mean to give it up," said Anna quickly. "I've always meant—when I was old enough—to go back and live there."

"Rodney and I have both sold our souls for money," said Michael, in an ironical tone that yet held something of bitter sadness. "He gave up Gay, and he's never married. He hasn't forgotten her—I

believe they still consider themselves engaged. I'm stuck fast in the city, and it's loathsome, especially when all the time you want to be doing something quite different. But we've both got money."

Anna stood there near him by the window, looking very fair and slender—almost like a fairy child, Michael thought.

"Some day perhaps it'll be different. Some day you may find a way of escape. Things do happen," she said.

"But we're not all as lucky as you, Anna. You've had this way of escape waiting for you all these years." He wondered for the first time, if she had been happy with them during her time of probation.

"But it won't be as perfect as I used to think," she said, in a low tone.

"Why not?"

"I shall be sorry to go away. I've been so happy here," she assured him, simply.

He was touched and pleased to hear her say that. All at once he thought they might have done so much more for her. She must often have felt a little solitary and neglected in that great house. Of course, she had been kindly treated and well cared for. His mother was always indulgent to the young, and was particular and careful, too, about material comfort.

"Oh, but this won't be good-bye, you know," he said, "you'll have to come over and see us whenever you feel inclined. I hate the thought of your going away too, and it's for your own sake, not for mine, that I've urged you not to sell your villa."

He looked at the clock. It would be time for him to start in a very few minutes. And there was so much he still wished to say to her—to assure her of his support in this matter that she had to decide.

For although he had advised her to go back to Sant' Elena, he knew that personally he would miss

her very much. She was so different from May, who at that age had had troops of eager admirers and was practically engaged to Ching-Chang. But somehow he didn't want Anna to make an early ambitious marriage as May had done. She needed other things—spiritual things.

"I must be off—I shall be late—" he said.

He dashed out of the room leaving Anna still standing pensively by the window.

It would hurt her, she began to think, to leave Michael. She would miss him—his friendly counsel—his kindness—his constant thought for her. But in her ears she heard the sea, sounding as it does on calm and windless nights, with a deep, strange call. "*Chiama il mare,*" as the Italian boatmen say. She seemed to hear that call now above the stir of traffic, the grinding of wheels, the shrill hooting of the motor-cars. And it was calling her back to Sant' Elena.

#### 4

On their way to the city that morning, Michael said to his father:

"I suppose you'll give Anna some sort of allowance if she decides to go and live at the Villa Caterina?"

They were traveling by "tube." Mr. Nugent had been brought up to habits of strict economy by a stern early Victorian parent who had believed in "taking care of the pence." He had never altered his ways, and had even successfully imposed them upon his son, so that neither of them would have dreamed of journeying to the office in one of the luxurious motor-cars that Athelstan kept for the use of his family.

He wrinkled his forehead.

"Give Anna an allowance? What on earth for?"

"To live on," said Michael, laconically. Somehow he thought his father would have shown a greater eagerness in the matter.

"Don't you think my hands are full enough as they are? We've still got to see what effect Patton's death is going to have upon us."

And again his face wore a look of unaccustomed worry.

Michael felt sorry for him. He wished now that he hadn't made the suggestion.

"Besides, we think she ought to sell. Land's fetching good prices in Italy now. A house like that is worth an awful lot."

"I don't think it would be wise to stop her from going to live there if she wants to. And she really does want to."

"Oh, that's only a girlish whim—she'd be sick of it in a month! And she'd far better stay with us till she marries. We must look out for someone for her," continued Athelstan airily. "May was married when she was very little older than Anna."

Michael felt curiously annoyed. He thought his father was being purposely obtuse. And he didn't like to hear Anna's future being disposed of in this light-hearted manner. But he forbore to argue the point. On thinking it over, too, he wondered what his father had meant by saying that he had already enough on his hands.

"Rodney's in debt again," said Athelstan, presently, taking a letter from his pocket. "He wants five hundred pounds at once. It's awkward just now. But he says he'll have to leave the regiment if I don't send it. And to tell you the truth I don't want him to come home yet. He'd only be taking up with that Lawton girl again."

"Why don't you let them marry? She'd keep him out of mischief—a clever, brainy girl like that."

Athelstan was on fairly intimate terms with his elder son where matters of business were concerned, but he had never discussed Rodney's love affair with him. Mrs. Nugent had opposed it so strenuously that her husband from motives of loyalty had not mentioned the matter to Michael. He had done all he could for Rodney from a pecuniary point of view, hoping that time and absence would teach him to forget Gay.

"Oh, well, your mother wouldn't hear of it," Athelstan said.

"But surely she must see it's ruining his life and Miss Lawton's, too," said Michael indignantly.

"It was a most unfortunate affair altogether. And then the girl was a Catholic. I'd no idea your mother had any prejudices about that. It's a very good sort of religion—Temple seemed to find it a great comfort. And this child of his—she's none the worse for being one, is she?"

He thrust Rodney's letter into his pocket and sighed. Every single member of his family, with the exception of Michael, who was oddly austere in his tastes, seemed bent on getting through as much money as possible. And though he was a rich man—or rather had always regarded himself as one—he sometimes felt that his resources were being strained to the uttermost.

"Well, it's no good meeting trouble half-way," he said, with a return to his usual cheery manner. "Only, if Anna does consult you about the Villa Caterina, mind you encourage her to sell it. It'll be wiser for her to get rid of it."

"Why?" inquired Michael.

"Well, for one thing, she's much too young to set up on her own. For another, she hasn't got the money to keep it up. And I can't do anything more for her—I really can't, Michael."

"I don't think I can stop her from going to live there. Her heart has always been in Italy."

"She's told you so?" asked Athelstan.

"Not in so many words. But I know she wants to go back."

Athelstan thought: "He'll be falling in love with Anna next. Juliet won't like that!"

At the Bank they emerged into the upper air. Caught, as it were, into a resistless torrent of black-coated top-hatted men, they swam with that inexorable tide along the crowded pavements.

Michael loathed that daily journey—the rushing noise of the impetuous tube, the walk that awaited them at the end. But to-day it seemed to him more distasteful than usual. To earn money, and yet more money, that he never had time to spend upon any of the really beautiful and desirable things that life could offer, the lovely and leisurely things—this was to him a monstrous waste, a gratuitous worshiping of Mammon. He couldn't blame Anna for wishing to free herself from that world, that atmosphere. And yet with her going he felt that the one really beautiful and tender thing would vanish forever from his horizon.

He seemed to see her standing there in the old schoolroom, with its somber background of books and the dark red wall-paper that had never been changed since May was a child. Lithe, slender and radiantly fair, with her gray eyes, her bright pale hair flowing back from her forehead, her small Italianate features drawn with the delicacy of a cameo. . . . Such a look of finish with all the simplicity that was such an essential part of her. The finish that belongs to accurate line and harmonious coloring.

To-day she tormented his thoughts. He hated the

prospect of losing her, and yet he knew he would not lift a finger to induce her to stay. For her own sake she must go back to the flowers and sunshine of her southern garden. She mustn't grow old here, learning to depend more and more upon this smothering luxury that led nowither. And he envied her—her power to cut the knot and free herself from it. It wasn't worth while. He had a vision of her then, standing amid the glancing silver of an olive orchard, with the sun pouring its gold upon her hair.

The human torrent increased its pace. Not a moment to be lost. Yes, they were all like sheep, driven by an incomprehensible but inexorable impulse. Michael stumbled forward with the rest, in the wake of his father, that little gray man who stepped onward with such brisk eagerness. They were both of them inconspicuous units, differing in no way from the rest. And, looking at those placid, pale faces around him, Michael wondered if they could all really be as free as they appeared, from that fierce interior revolt that to-day was shaking, with a kind of seismic force, his own soul to its very foundations.

He moved forward blindly with the rest, his face sullen and stormy, thinking of Anna. . . .

## CHAPTER IV

### MRS. NUGENT INTERRUPTS

#### I

MRS. NUGENT rarely went up to Michael's room, which was on a half-landing near the top of the house. It was a big room with an alcove, so that his bed was screened off, and the rest was furnished as a sitting-room. Formerly he and Rodney had shared this spacious apartment, but the arrangement came to an end when they were no longer schoolboys.

It suddenly occurred to her that, as Michael would shortly be going away for a few weeks, it would be as well to have his room painted and papered. It hadn't been done for a long time. If she asked him, she knew that he would vehemently refuse to have anything changed. But Mrs. Nugent had a secret passion for house-decoration; she was a woman, too, of considerable taste; it was quite time that Michael's surroundings should be a little more in keeping with the rest of the house. She felt quite ashamed sometimes when Michael took Ching-Chang up to his room to have a smoke.

The place was overflowing with books. She had no idea that Michael possessed so many. The room, being at the back of the house, was somewhat dark, and it was difficult for her to examine them. But her elder son had always been something of an enigma to her, and she felt a sudden curiosity to know what sort of literature interested him.

That he spent long hours reading, she was perfectly aware; his light could be seen burning hours after everyone else had gone to bed. Mrs. Nugent approached the somewhat untidy shelves. A title caught her eye. It was, *The Catholic Church from Within*. Next to it was a smaller book in limp morocco cover with gilt letters. She opened it and read the ominous words, *Roman Missal*. The shelf, from end to end, was filled with books of like purport; lives of saints, the Exercises of St. Ignatius, copies of the Imitation both in Latin and English, a worn Breviary. There were books, too, on the Papacy, others explanatory of the Mass, and several prayer-books, some of which looked as if they had been much used. A complete set of Cardinal Newman's works occupied a shelf to themselves.

It took Mrs. Nugent a few minutes to recover from her dismayed astonishment. When Anna had first come to stay with them, she had herself decided that as long as there was no governess to undertake the task, Michael should be deputed to escort her to church. He was always good-natured, and ready to be helpful when anything was required, and she felt that with his stern and austere character he would be the least likely of anyone to be influenced by what he saw and heard. It is not pleasant for a vain, complacent woman to discover that, for once in her life, she has been thoroughly mistaken, yet that was Mrs. Nugent's present mortified condition.

She sat down in one of Michael's capacious, shabby arm-chairs, and began to reflect. A shock of any kind always aroused her from her habitual indolent lethargy, and she was at that moment very wide-awake indeed. She felt like Fatima, when she made her gruesome discovery in Bluebeard's forbidden chamber.

When she looked back, she saw that Michael

throughout Anna's stay with them had shown himself assiduous, though at no time eager, in the matter of taking the girl to church. She wondered what it was that he had seen and heard that had made him desirous of knowing more. Had Anna said things to him? She dismissed the thought as idle. He was not at all the sort of man to permit himself to be influenced by a child. Never once had Mrs. Nugent heard Anna allude to her religion, and she had therefore rashly concluded that either she took it very much for granted or else that she was quite indifferent to it. There were mornings, of course, when Michael had said that Anna wished to go to Mass before breakfast, and had made no difficulty about getting up earlier in order to escort her. Little by little Mrs. Nugent began to piece the matter together. She had no prejudice against the Catholic religion in itself, for she knew next to nothing about it, but she was convinced that socially it was detrimental to anyone to belong to it. That was why she had opposed, with hidden and secret fierceness, the idea of a marriage between Rodney and Miss Lawton. It was bad enough for Rodney to fall in love with a penniless girl older than himself, but that she should be a Catholic into the bargain, fairly, according to modern parlance, put the lid on it. The thought of Rodney's entanglement set her thoughts traveling in a very different direction. Was there—could there—be anything between Michael and Anna that was not strictly fraternal? She dismissed the hypothesis at once. Anna was far too young, a mere child, abruptly childish, too, for her years. If he had thought of Anna at all, it must have been simply as a charming, affectionate little sister. Nothing else was possible. Men did sometimes fall in love with mere children, but Michael was the last man to do it. And, besides, only the other day he had almost urged Anna not to

sell the Villa Caterina. It was obvious, therefore, that he had no particular reason for wishing to keep her in London.

Hanging opposite to her on a large space of blank wall was an immense crucifix. The figure was of some silver-colored metal, affixed to an ebony cross. Michael had not attempted to hide it; it hung there for all to see. It was an antique of great beauty. But combined with the books it gave her maternal heart a fresh stab of dismay. She had felt so sure of Michael. The blow touched her intelligence. She had often said she could read her children like so many books. But there had nevertheless always been things about Michael, boy and man, that had puzzled her.

Mrs. Nugent had very seldom openly interfered with her children. She was a person whose lethargic attitude toward life demanded conditions of consistent harmony. Had she discovered them in acts of mischief and disobedience in their youth, she would have deputed one of their many guardians, nurse or governess, to exercise a more fruitful vigilance. She had never wanted to come to terms with them herself, to admonish or punish. It would have been, to say the least of it, far too fatiguing. And she did not want to confront Michael now with her sinister discovery. Her methods were far suaver than that. She could not, as in the case of Rodney, remove the glittering object of his desire, for Catholic churches were, alas, far too numerous in London now. She must think of other means.

She went downstairs and began to examine the books containing patterns of wall-papers, curtains, and chintzes, in order to decide the scheme of decoration that was to be employed. When everything was settled, Michael was of course to have the casting vote. His taste lay in the direction of quiet, grave

colors and harmonious contrasts, nothing that caught the eye. His room, she told herself, wanted doing up badly. She wished she could have made a clean sweep of everything in it.

There was no clew to the reason of this extraordinary departure of Michael's except that he must have been familiarized with these things in his weekly expeditions with Anna to Westminster Cathedral, lasting now over a term of years. Mrs. Nugent was perturbed, but by no means despairing. There had never been any Roman Catholics in her own family, and Temple Nugent appeared to be the only relation on her husband's side who had ever "gone over to Rome."

She had no wish to seek out Michael, as many mothers would have done, and unburden her heart, with all its passionate anxiety and fears, to him, giving him a glimpse of that solicitude to which surely he could not remain indifferent. But she could not remember that she had ever spoken to him on the subject of religion; she had left that part of his education, like all the rest of it, to others. Nor would she at any time have cared to provoke a scene, complex, emotional, and even perhaps harrowing. But she wondered how far Michael had gone along the road that led to Rome, whether he was finding it difficult or easy, repellent or attractive. What, in fact, it was like when one got quite close to it. . . .

She looked at her elder son, that night at dinner, with a kind of soft and melancholy scrutiny. But he had acquired significance in her eyes, and she was glad to think that she held the clew to what had often puzzled her in his deliberate austerity, his consistent gravity, which seemed to have chased from him something of the gayety of youth.

## 2

Athelstan and Michael always lunched together at the same restaurant, sitting at the same table, eating food that varied little from day to day. It was a necessary interlude in the hours of work and assiduous money-making, but it held little pleasure for Michael.

A week or two had passed since Mrs. Nugent's discovery, and Michael was still wholly unaware of it. He had been told that his room needed "doing up," and as he was aware that this proceeding gave his mother a temporary interest in life, he tactfully acquiesced in the scheme and gave his opinion upon the subject of paper and paint without reluctance. It was a warm day in April—the kind of day when pessimists shake their heads and say it can't possibly last and we shall pay for it by and by, instead of enjoying the good moment whole-heartedly.

They had just taken their seats at the table and Athelstan had given the order to the waiter who invariably, so to speak, took charge of them, when the elder Nugent remarked:

"You've worked uncommonly well this year, Michael, and I mean to take you into partnership. Nugent and Son—it was that for many years, you know."

"Oh, thanks most awfully, Dad," said Michael, confused.

Outwardly he was grateful for his father's generosity; inwardly he hated himself for feeling that the chains had tightened a little. A partner? Nugent and Son. . . . And as the years went on, and Athelstan—incredible prospect—grew older and retired from an active participation in the firm, Michael would slip into those comfortable shoes. He would be able to marry when he was a partner. But he had never thought of marriage. He had never played

with love as Rodney had done. He had not even thought of marriage that day, not so long ago, when he had for the first time realized Anna's beauty. He had only thought of her as a dear charming child, hidden away in the old gloomy schoolroom, leading the life that he supposed girls of that age had to lead.

Now for the first time he seemed to see the words marriage and Anna in juxtaposition, tormentingly. But no, he could never share that fairy, unreal life of hers at Sant' Elena. A partner? He would be bound body and soul to Nugent and Son. No escape now. If he married and left Lancaster Gate, it would be to settle down in some convenient suburb not too far from a golf-course. He could see the very house, banal and monstrous in its detached double-fronted superiority to its neighbors. The neat garden with a tennis court. "Ideal residence for a city man" he could see the advertisement which would tempt him to go and inspect it. He would go up every day to London, arriving at Cannon Street or Waterloo. Cannon Street—the name seemed to him less a place than an agglomeration of acrid odors, the distillation of a million fogs, the deposit of many decades of evil smoke . . . an inferno such as Dante might have painted. And he would be one of hundreds of pallid city men descending from the overflowing morning trains. Back to the city, and in the evening back to the red-brick suburban home replete with every labor-saving device, with its jaunty white-painted balcony and gimcrack stucco decorations. Still, if Anna were to be there, waiting for him. . . . He thrust the thought from him. He couldn't conceive of such an existence as that for Anna. She had known other things, fairer, more beautiful things, spacious in their fresh loveliness, and sometimes he had wondered how far the memory of them still held her.

"You're not eating anything," said Athelstan suddenly.

Perhaps he had sprung the news too suddenly upon him. For Michael was looking very pale, and his expression was more repressed even than usual. Odd, but he had never noticed before what a queer, dreamy, unpractical look his son had about the eyes. Just as if he were thinking of something a long way off. Perhaps this idea of the partnership had "staggered" him. Even a junior partnership would make a considerable difference to his income. It might be he was thinking of marriage. Well, Athelstan would have no objection to that. He had married young himself, and had never regretted it. But somehow Michael had never seemed to be a marrying man; he was supposed to dislike girls, and certainly he never sought their society. He was quite different in this respect from Rodney. Athelstan felt that it would add dignity and solidity to his own position to have his elder son settled in life, always provided that he chose the right woman.

Michael ate a scanty lunch. He wasn't hungry. The news had upset him. While his father seemed and intended indeed to give royally, he was in reality taking away more than he knew. Shutting out light and air and beauty . . . and Anna. Anna was definitely in his mind now as the woman he wished to marry. Even so, he wasn't going to try to stop her from going back to Sant' Elena. He wanted to think of her there, in the sunshine and among the flowers that belonged to her.

And then there was the religious question that had been troubling him now for how many years. Ever since the days when he had first accompanied Anna to Mass, and had read from her prayer-book, and had been startled by the wonder and beauty of those liturgical prayers with all their simple yet sublime per-

fection. He had wondered sometimes how his parents would take it if he became a Catholic, but of this he could form no opinion, he did not know in the least what they felt about it, he could never remember having heard the subject discussed. They hadn't, it is true, liked the idea of Rodney's marrying a Catholic, but there were objections to Gay on the score of pennilessness besides.

He longed at that moment to tell his father, but in his sensitiveness he shrank from speaking of something that was so intimate, so much part of himself. And anyhow it didn't seem quite the moment.

He was glad when coffee was brought. They lit their cigarettes and went out into the street, where the warm spring wind raced by with a kind of wild gayety.

## 3

Michael stayed at home to dinner that night, nor would he tell himself that he had formed the habit of doing so lately, ever since it had been decreed that Anna was to dine downstairs.

She wore a white dress, very simply made, with touches of pale blue. Her golden hair looked pale under the electric light.

"Well, what have you been doing to-day, Anna?" asked Athelstan.

It was his invariable question, and generally it received a commonplace answer, for Anna's days differed little, one from another.

To-night she sprang a surprise upon her three interlocutors.

"I met Gay in Bond Street."

"Gay!"

It seemed to Anna that the three voices exclaimed the word in chorus. She colored faintly.

"Did you speak to her, Anna darling?" asked Mrs.

Nugent, opening her eyes very wide as if she were just awake.

"She ran up to me," said Anna. "We had tea together. . . ."

"Why has she come back from Australia?" asked Athelstan.

"She didn't want to stay there any longer. She was homesick."

"But she hasn't a home," objected Mrs. Nugent. Her lazy voice held a faint note of acerbity.

"She wants to find something to do in England," said Anna.

Athelstan was mildly interested. He had liked Miss Lawton, her courage, her independence, her extraordinary ability. "She'll soon find something. A clever girl like that won't be long out of a job."

"She's found something," said Anna, looking delightfully demure. "I've engaged her as my companion when I go to Sant' Elena. She does not mind waiting a little, she says." She flung her little bombshell with a calmness that astonished Michael. "She likes the idea."

"What a good scheme," said Michael.

"A good scheme, Michael? I should call it a very bad one. If darling Anna wants a companion she ought to have a much older woman. Besides, I had to send Miss Lawton away, so it wouldn't look at all well, would it? And then it isn't certain that Anna is going back to Italy at all."

Anna was silent. She was aware as never before of conflicting loyalties, just as she had been at the time of Gay's peremptory dismissal. She had loved her very much—her first girl-friend. She had never forgotten her, and as she grew older, she realized what Gay must have suffered under that roof, what she must indeed still be suffering in her long separation from Rodney. Mrs. Nugent's action in dismissing

her had always seemed to Anna a terrible, arbitrary one. And always, always, too, it had seemed cruel, both in intention and in manner of accomplishment.

She looked across the table at Michael almost imploringly, and he merely said in a cold formal tone:

"Anna has a right to decide. When she's eighteen we have no further control over her."

His cold clean-cut face showed no emotion; his violet eyes were like bright steel. He seemed to be judging the case as if it were a stranger's, not concerning himself at all. Nugent and Son. . . . yes, he would soon be fast bound to the firm and its interests; he would be a prosperous hard-working man like his father, with no time to enjoy the fruits of his labor. And all the time—yes, all the time—Anna, from her fairy fastness in the South, would haunt him.

He knew then that he loved Anna. . . .

"Oh, I should think Miss Lawton would do very well indeed," said Athelstan, "and it's time to let bygones be bygones now. I'm sure Rodney's quite forgotten that old affair," he added mendaciously. "And Anna must have a chaperon of sorts."

"Miss Lawton must have changed very much if she's become an adequate chaperon," said Mrs. Nugent, indolently.

When dinner was ended, Athelstan retired to his study to smoke, and Michael went with him. They glanced at the evening papers, and sometimes made laconic remarks concerning the items of news. No one was going out that evening. At ten o'clock Mrs. Nugent appeared, and Michael shortly afterwards went up to his room. He was tired, and he had letters to write. On his way he passed the schoolroom door; it was shut but a streak of light showed beneath it. He opened it and went in. Anna was sitting by the open window looking out into the night. A faint warm breeze flowed into the room.

"Am I disturbing you?" said Michael, hesitating.

"Oh, no—do come in," said Anna.

He sat down opposite to her, near the window. After a moment's pause, he said abruptly:

"Have you decided to go back to Italy?"

"Yes. With Gay. That makes it easier." She compressed her lips so that her pure, pale face assumed almost a look of severity. "You mustn't think it's because I want to go away from here. That's the part that hurts. The more I think of it the more it hurts. But I'm half Italian . . . and I want Italy."

"I'm glad you feel like that about leaving us," said Michael, in an odd, constrained tone. "We shall miss you."

He felt now as if all the light and sunshine would leave the house when Anna departed. Some day, perhaps, she would return. It might even be that he himself would invite her to do so. But not now. She was too young. Her very youth and inexperience seemed to forbid any premature disclosure on his part of the feeling he had for her. Let her go, for a year—even for two years. Let her see that other world that was calling to her. He was glad, too, to think Gay would be there, so different from Anna in her fiery, eager youth, her flaming intellect, her unconventional beauty.

"I think you're right, you know," he added. "Even about Gay."

The seal of his approval counted for a good deal. All of a sudden she felt what it would mean to her to live far away from Michael. All through her London life he had been there, comforting her when anything went amiss, always ready to amuse her, offering cold wise advice when she asked his opinion. To leave him would surely tear her heart in two. Of course, he must still regard her as a child—she had been the only child in that house for so long. He was

kind to her . . . but then it was his way to be kind.

"I shall miss you," she said tremulously.

Michael glanced sharply at her, as if trying to read a deeper significance into those shyly uttered words. But Anna's face was scarcely a more revealing one than his own. It was pale and controlled—so much she had inherited from the Nugents—and to him it was charming as well as beautiful, with its fair English coloring, its Latin accuracy of line. . . .

"You must write, you know," he said, "not only to my mother, but to me. I shall want to hear what you're doing. Don't let's lose sight of you. Of course I know it isn't so very far off, but we're none of us much hand at traveling. Six weeks in Scotland—that's about the sum of it. Cannes for my mother, when she's had a touch of bronchitis. I'd like to see Italy, but I don't suppose I shall ever have time."

"Oh, you must come out and pay us a visit—that would be delightful. Why, I can ask anyone I like!"

Suddenly the prospect of living her own life seemed quite entralling. She could have Michael there as a guest. She longed to show him Sant' Elena, the blue wonder of its sea and sky, the glancing silver of the olives, the pink villa on its rocky promontory.

"Well, anyhow, even if it never materializes it's a dream to look forward to," said Michael.

"Shall you ever go to Mass when I'm not here?" she asked, suddenly.

"I hope to go every Sunday. You've done that for me anyhow." There was a new warmth in his voice. "Sometimes I hold my breath to think how easily it might have passed me by. I suppose everyone feels that who hasn't been born to the Faith. It's such a chance, isn't it, if we come into contact with it at all!"

Anna was silent. She had never heard Michael speak with such emotion before.

"Just your coming—and my mother settling I was to be the one to take you to Mass. Why, I might have refused—it wasn't always convenient—but you looked so lost and lonely I thought it was the least I could do for you. . . . So you see I've got to thank you for it, Anna."

"Oh, then you really mean——" She stopped.

"Yes, I really mean. I'm only hesitating because I'm such a coward."

"Oh, don't hesitate, Michael. When it's so close—waiting for you. Such riches—such love. . . ." Her eyes were bright with tears.

"Ah, my dear child, it isn't so easy or so simple as you think. And just now it would be unusually difficult."

"Oh, but one mustn't wait. . . ." she whispered.

The door opened and Mrs. Nugent came into the room. No doubt she had heard voices—the servants were wont to say that she had ears and eyes all over her head, for all that she looked half asleep.

"Why, Michael darling," she said.

She opened her eyes very wide indeed and looked at Anna.

"Anna dearest, it's very naughty of you to sit up so late. Why, I sent you up to bed hours ago!"

Anna rose rather stiffly from her seat. A clock chimed eleven. But the time had passed very quickly indeed, and she had not said half what she wished to say to Michael. The thought that he had made up his mind to be a Catholic filled her with a strange joy.

"Anna was reading. I am afraid I interrupted her," said Michael.

For the first time some intuitive knowledge of the secret situation, scarcely as yet envisaged by the two principal actors in it, was forced upon Mrs. Nugent. Subconsciously she opposed it. Michael and Anna!

But no—it was impossible. He had always been quite ineffusively kind to the child, and he had moreover shown himself decidedly in favor of her returning to Sant' Elena. When she remembered this, Mrs. Nugent felt relieved. She wanted both her sons to marry "well." Certainly not a relation—particularly a Nugent relation—for she had a secret contempt for her husband's family. And now that Michael was so soon to be made a partner in the firm he would be very well off and in a position to marry. It was a pity that he disliked dancing and indeed all amusements where women took part. He liked outdoor things—yachting, hunting, golfing, lawn-tennis, pursuits that brought him into contact with other athletic young men. It was absurd for her to feel any anxiety about his interest in Anna. Yet once or twice lately he had given evidence of it in a quite unequivocal manner. Athelstan had told her he had actually proposed that they should give her an allowance when she left them!

These thoughts crowded confusedly into her brain, but aloud she only said:

"Good-night, Michael dearest, I think I shall stay and have a little quiet talk with Anna."

Michael rose to his feet. He was very tall—to Anna he seemed immense. She had to crane her neck to look up into his face.

"Good-night, Mother. Good-night, Anna."

He went out of the room, closing the door softly. But Anna's words were still ringing in his head, "*Oh, don't hesitate . . . when it's so close—waiting for you. Such riches . . . such love. . . .*"

Mrs. Nugent sat down upon the chair lately vacated by her son.

"Dear me, how warm it is for the time of year. You must almost feel as if you were in Italy, Anna."

"Yes—it feels like sirocco," said Anna. She bent

forward a little so that the wind might touch her burning face.

Behind that suave friendliness she felt that Aunt Juliet was angry. Angry with both herself and Michael, but more especially with her. . . .

Anna still felt in every nerve Michael's tormenting presence. She knew now what it would mean to leave him, perhaps never to see him again until he was married.

"I suppose you've quite made up your mind to go back to Sant' Elena since you've actually engaged Miss Lawton?" said Mrs. Nugent.

"Yes," said Anna. Then she added timidly, "But not if you'd rather I didn't, Aunt Juliet."

"Your uncle and I both feel it's entirely a matter for your own decision," said Mrs. Nugent. "And about Miss Lawton—I spoke without thinking at dinner—I don't see why she shouldn't go with you. Rodney is in India and hardly likely to come home this year. I'm sure you wouldn't try to do anything to bring them together, knowing what we feel about it, would you, darling?"

"Oh, no," said Anna, hardly knowing what she was saying. She had woven such beautiful childish dreams about these two brilliant beings, meeting each other again by the blue sea and among the olive woods and chestnut groves of Sant' Elena.

"And now about yourself, Anna darling. I think it's only kind to tell you not to attach any importance to any . . . any attention Michael may have shown you. Remember you are still to him the little girl, the dear little cousin, you were when you first came to us. I don't suppose he's even aware that you're grown up. Girls of your age are apt to have sentimental ideas about any young man who shows them particular attention. That's why I don't want you to give a second thought to anything Michael

may say to express his fondness for his little cousin. . . .”

Not a feature of the girl’s pale, immobile face moved. Her mouth was compressed and steady. She fixed her gray eyes upon Mrs. Nugent’s face and seemed to be listening with combined attention and indifference.

“Michael has never expressed any fondness for me,” she said at last, stonily.

“Oh, don’t be offended, dearest Anna. I can’t help remembering that you haven’t got a mother!”

“But I’m not in the least offended, Aunt Juliet. You have a right to say anything you wish to me.” Her smile was a little forced. “I don’t think, though, you need be at all anxious about Michael and me!”

“Oh, don’t exaggerate, dearest Anna. I’m not so foolish as to be anxious about dear old Michael. He’s so utterly indifferent to women and girls. He’s not in the least like Rodney, and when he does fall in love it will be for always. But knowing how easily girls get sentimental—at least they used to in my day, and I don’t suppose they’ve changed so very much, although they do go in for all sorts of professions—I thought I’d better say just one little word to you. I shouldn’t like you to think yourself ill-used or broken-hearted.”

“But Aunt Juliet—such an idea would never enter my head!” Anna defended herself warmly from what seemed to her an almost unwholesome charge. She did hope Mrs. Nugent wouldn’t say anything of the kind to Michael. “You mustn’t really be so anxious about *me*!”

It was one thing to be conscious of a secret act of renunciation in returning to the Villa Caterina—a place that perhaps would never know Michael’s tall, active figure—but quite another to be informed definitely that there was nothing at all in that sweet

concern for her welfare, of which daily she was becoming more passionately conscious. Her love for Michael was a very simple thing in those days, but already it was capable of becoming complex and concentrated should anyone try to come between them. She thought of Gay's fate with a little shudder.

It hurt her, too, to be told that to Michael she was still only the little girl who had come to the house nearly four years ago—it incredibly increased the gulf of years between them. Seven—nearly eight years . . . but to-night it had seemed for a minute or two that the barrier had been actually lifted and that they had talked together as two equal comrades. She seemed then to have tasted to the full the promised sweetness of his friendship. But destiny in the shape of Aunt Juliet had intervened. Anna felt a sudden anger with herself. Was she becoming silly and sentimental, just as Mrs. Nugent had feared she might? Was it apparent? Had she by some unconscious word or gesture revealed anything? . . .

Mrs. Nugent rose. She remembered Michael's strange choice of literature, and she would have liked to question Anna on that point too, but she felt that the moment was not quite propitious. It would confuse the issues, just when she wanted them to be quite clear. And it was ridiculous to suppose that in the matter of religion Anna could ever have had the slightest influence over Michael.

"Good-night, Anna. You quite understand that we shan't offer any opposition to your going back to Sant' Elena with Miss Lawton? Both your uncle and I believe in giving plenty of independence to young people—it's the fashion, and one must go with the times. I hope some day you will marry, my dear. It's quite the best thing. Marriage—a good

husband, who in your case ought to be a Roman Catholic—charming babies. . . ." Her voice assumed a dreamy tone as if she were trying to lift the veil from the future.

She went out of the room.

## 4

Anna replaced her book upon the shelf, switched off the light, and went along the passage to her own room, with its wide view of the London sky, the distant houses in Park Lane, the great black masses of the trees that in the day-time were beginning to show a bright sea of emerald foliage.

If she had ever thought of drawing back from that decision of hers about Sant' Elena, she was aware now that it would be practically impossible, after that conversation with her aunt. The ground was cut away from beneath her feet. Michael's discovered presence in the schoolroom that night had clinched her destiny. She was to be allowed to go with Gay. They wouldn't try to prevent her. The sooner the better. She would cut the cords with brutal abruptness. She wouldn't let things . . . bleed to death. And as if to conform this purpose, she sat down and wrote a little note to Gay to be posted in the morning.

MY DEAR GAY:

*I am going to Sant' Elena next week. Can you be ready to start on Tuesday? All opposition is withdrawn. It will be so nice having you. With love from*

ANNA

She sat before the mirror, brushing her long fair silken hair. It lay like a pale golden fleece about

her shoulders. Between the folds of it her face showed narrow and white, lit by the two big gray eyes. Although she did not know it, she looked like a spirit rather than a woman.

She said aloud: "Gay must have suffered horribly. It was worse for her—she knew that Rodney loved her. But perhaps that made it easier. Perhaps if one *knew*, it would be easier."

The mouth twitched into a faint puckered smile.

"I mustn't be silly or sentimental about Michael."  
"

The gray eyes shone now, bright with tears.

Anna turned away from the pale passionate face in the mirror, slipped on to her knees, crossed herself and prayed.

On the following day there was no sign of Michael. Anna asked no questions, but she wondered if his absence would be a prolonged one. He had never told her that he was going away. Generally he would say: "I'm off to-morrow to Manchester or Birmingham," wherever it might happen to be. Athelstan Nugent rarely visited the provinces now on business for the firm; he sent a delegate in the person of his son. Secretly he was proud of Michael's looks, that touch of sleepy hauteur in his bearing, his wonderful capacity for detecting a weak or ambiguous spot, his iron will that no one suspected. Something too in his clear vision that revolted against anything equivocal. Athelstan's confidence in him was complete.

But this time Michael had gone off without a word. Anna tried to think that this abrupt departure did not concern herself at all. Besides, he was never away for very long; he couldn't be spared. She comforted herself with the thought. He would surely return long before Tuesday. . . .

At dinner that night, Athelstan said: "I wonder how Micky's getting on." He always called him "Micky" when he was unusually pleased with him.

Anna looked up then. "Has Michael gone away, Uncle Athelstan?"

"Yes—I got a telegram last night late—an important job to put through. I nearly went myself, but on the whole I thought Michael would do it every bit as well. He's got to learn, too, that it isn't a cushy job to be junior partner in Nugent and Son." He beamed with satisfaction.

"He won't be away long, Anna," said Mrs. Nugent in her soft, indolent voice. "Not more than a week or ten days at most."

"While he is in the North he can do one or two things for me," said Athelstan.

Anna's heart sank a little. For the first time she felt that he might not return before her departure. It had been planned then. He had been sent away, so delicately and tactfully, that perhaps he himself had no suspicion of the real reason. No fuss made—no opposition shown. They had learnt how to do things more diplomatically since the stormy episode of Rodney and Gay. . . .

But he would certainly write. He had asked for letters—letters written to himself. She was glad to remember that now.

Mrs. Nugent said cheerfully: "And now we shall have to think of getting Anna off, since she insists upon leaving us. It'll be delicious in the South now. I shouldn't wonder if we took a trip out next winter to see how you're getting on. You could get rid of Miss Lawton, couldn't you, for a few days?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Anna dully. "It would be delightful if you could come. I'm sure you'd like it." She hardly knew what she was saying, her aunt's words had disconcerted her so much.

"Anyhow, Anna must come home every year to have a look at *us*," said Athelstan, genially.

For his own part he didn't in the least want to get rid of her. It was all nonsense of course, this scare of Juliet's about Michael. Nothing in it—and even if there had been, he was conscious that the idea rather pleased him than otherwise. Anna wasn't penniless, and her being of another religion didn't really signify. And he should like to feel that she was his daughter. She seemed already so very much one of the family.

"I thought of going on Tuesday," said Anna, with a sick sense of cowardice in not being able boldly to defer the date for at least another fortnight. "I've written to Gay."

"Tuesday — Tuesday — there's nothing against Tuesday, as far as I can see," murmured Mrs. Nugent, dreamily.

There was something bitter in the thought of how completely and finally Mrs. Nugent had accepted her decision. Anna saw that she was not to be allowed a loop-hole of escape from her self-planned departure. But she had always felt certain that Michael would be there to see her off, to make plans for meeting again in the future. Instead of which they had sent him away; he wasn't perhaps to be allowed to see her again. Across Mrs. Nugent's dreamy kindliness, Anna could discern something that looked like a streak of gray flint, reminding her of a stratum of invisible rock lying beneath a smiling and fertile landscape.

"Anna must go when it suits her. No hurry at all," said Athelstan. He didn't perhaps notice the streak of gray flint. It was only now and then that he, so to speak, struck it inadvertently with his spade. Just as when he allowed Gay to be dismissed without a word, knowing that Rodney loved her and had

asked her to marry him. Perhaps, indeed, he knew it was there and so tried never to dig deep enough to touch it—realizing, too, how useless it would be to oppose it, this elemental thing of inflexible hardness.

"I'm going with May to the Beavingtons' to-night," announced Mrs. Nugent, presently.

She liked to be seen with her beautiful daughter, and to be told that she looked like her elder sister rather than her mother. You'd never think. . . . And in truth she bore her years well; her embon-point was not sufficient to disfigure her, and it smoothed her calm face clear of lines.

## 5

Anna was alone in the schoolroom sitting by the open window, just as she had been last night when Michael came in and sat with her for that beautiful hour.

London was very still, almost breathless; the warm wind had dropped and a slight mist obscured sights and sounds. The trees in the Park loomed like gigantic formless phantoms. The lights along the Bayswater Road were faint and blurred.

"I'm going—I'm really going," she thought. "I'm not to be allowed to stay. They've taken me at my word. They're insisting. . . ." A sob rose to her throat. "I'm mad to make a fuss when I settled everything myself." The mist seemed to become a little thicker so that it swallowed up Michael's tall, familiar figure. He just wasn't there. It was as if the principal and apparently immutable feature of the landscape had been ruthlessly removed. And she wanted him so very much. She was in reality just as foolish and sentimental about him as Mrs. Nugent had feared that she might be. So silly and sentimental that she wanted to cry.

"How hateful it must be to fall in love," thought Anna.

For as yet she dared not examine her own feeling for him too closely. She was afraid of making unpleasant discoveries. She wanted to think of him always and only as a dear, dear friend.

It was quite true perhaps—to Michael she was only the little girl who had come to London, cold and strange and uncomforted, four years ago. This thought bruised her.

## CHAPTER V.

### AT THE VILLA CATERINA

#### I

NOT even Gay Lawton, who accompanied Anna on that long journey, ever suspected with what a sense of despair and anguish the girl turned her back upon the home that for four years had sheltered her.

If Michael had been there to say good-bye to her, Anna felt that she could have borne it. But not a word of or from him had reached her since his sudden departure on the day after their intimate little talk in the schoolroom. When he returned he would discover, perhaps for the first time, that she had left London.

When she looked at Gay she thought: "We've both been treated alike." But Gay had had the certain knowledge of Rodney's love to support and sustain her in that evil hour. She herself had nothing. Her going could make no possible difference to Michael.

Gay was little changed. She was slightly emphasized, slightly more pronounced than she used to be. She seemed even more independent and competent than in the old days; mingled with her pride, too, there was a touch of hardness, almost of defiance, born of the time when she had been so signally defeated by May Chingford.

Life wasn't easy even for a woman with exceptional brains if she hadn't a penny in the world, as

Gay had long since discovered. One put by, of course, and then illness had a knack of intervening and swallowing up one's economies. She had had a long illness in Australia, and though it had not permanently weakened her health, it had left her, for the time, almost without resources. That was why she had so eagerly accepted Anna's offer to accompany her to Sant' Elena. The salary was negligible, but she would have things her own way. She had always been able to rule Anna. . . .

She looked after Anna during the journey with a competent, half maternal tenderness. Anna constituted to her the one frail link with Rodney. Rodney wrote to her still, with some regularity, but after nearly three years a change had crept into his letters—how indeed should it be otherwise? His new life claimed his time and strength, and he had developed a wonderful zeal for his profession. And she had not—she had never had—a place in that life. He had meant—oh, she was certain of it!—to be faithful to their love, but she was too far off. Her image had receded into the shadows, had lost its first emphatic outlines. . . .

The spring was already far advanced when they reached Sant' Elena, and Anna's joy at finding herself back there once more chased away something of the inevitable gloom of departure. She looked out as of old from window and loggia upon the beautiful Bay of Tigullio, with its fine headlands dipping into the sea, and the white towns clinging like patches of pearl and ivory along its shores. The white-sailed fishing-craft; the gayly-painted boats with green or scarlet oars that flashed as they dipped, releasing showers of diamonds; the orchards of olive and chestnut; the blue line of sea stretching away to Spezia, still offered themselves unchanged to her gaze. She was as astonished at all the loveliness as

if she had never seen it before, had never carried its remembrance in her heart throughout those years of London exile.

In the garden the Judas trees were in flower, making soft crimson patches amid the emerald green and bright gold of the young leaves; a feathery bush of mimosa held out golden tassels to the sun; the tulips made rims of fire along the beds, and the Banksian roses and wistaria were in their full beauty. Great boughs of pine and ilex framed that blue picture of sea and sky with their lustrous green foliage. The garden had run a little wild; but its very wildness was beautiful. And the square pink villa had not changed. It stood there proudly on its own little promontory thrust into the sea, half hidden by its deep woodland of pine and ilex and stately cypress. The sound of the waves could be heard washing against the tufa cliff upon which it was built. To the west, at night the familiar lamp on the lighthouse at Sant' Elena pricked the darkness.

May came with fresh beauties to compensate for the loss of April's lavish blossoming. The fireflies twinkled in the groves of bamboos and amid the tall, pale, proud Madonna lilies. There were wonderful dawns then, when the mountains emerged like gray transparent shadows stretching out to the great headland that lay close to Spezia and the island of Palmaria, that looked like a pearl dropped into the sea. And the sea itself was pearl-like, smooth, scarcely wrinkled, reflecting accurately the snowy sails that were poised upon it, and the green and scarlet of flashing oars. The walls were crowned with masses of valerian in soft pink blots, and white stars of cystus. And the pink roses that Anna remembered, showed their bright clusters against the pallor of the sea. The white blossoms of acacias and magnolias filled the air with almond fragrance.

There was a *festa* in the town one summer night, and the port was illuminated. A long ripple of light outlined the arm of the little harbor with a fiery rim. The boats that swung in the shelter of the port were starred and strung with lanterns. A sound of music came across the water, faintly melancholy. It was very calm, and the rippling reflections from the houses showed in bright ladder-like patterns of rose and gold in the black water. It was a *festa* of the Madonna, and all along the road her little shrines were illuminated, and decorated with flowers and lamps. Anna liked to watch the fishing boats swim into the harbor all festooned with lights.

Later on there were fireworks of the terrifying, explosive kind so popular in Italy, lighting up the sky with their emulous stars, their thick cloud-like masses of luminous white smoke. It was almost as if the town had been attacked in an air raid; so continuous were the crashing sounds, the fierce, alarming explosions.

## 2

Anna knew that Gay was restless and discontented by her purposeless activity, her perpetual quest for something to do. It wasn't enough for her, as it was for Anna, to look upon that blue world and enjoy its loveliness, to swim in that blue warm sea, and climb through terraced olive-yards to the heights above the little village. Anna was perplexed at this restless, moody, silent Gay, with her dark, beautiful, unhappy face. Her unfortunate love-affair, dragging on to what Anna feared would be a slow, miserable ending, had aged and embittered her.

One day she looked across the table at Anna and said suddenly:

"There was nothing between you and Michael, was there?"

"Nothing at all," Anna said quickly, hoping that Gay would not question her too closely on the point.

For she never lost the hope that some day Michael would journey out to Sant' Elena to see her. He didn't write—why should he? They had never written to each other, and if Anna had written she would hardly have known what to say. She had sent dutiful letters to Mrs. Nugent, telling her that she was well and happy and hoped that she would visit her in the autumn. But there had been no corresponding suggestion that Anna should return to London for a few weeks.

"I think he might have been more constant than Rodney," said Gay, shrugging her thin high shoulders.

"But Rodney is constant, isn't he?"

"He says he is, and I daresay he really believes he is," replied Gay, evasively.

"I wish he could come home," said Anna.

"He won't do that. If he did he would have to end it one way or the other. He could have got leave heaps of times in these last two years and a half. But he won't face it. He's like his mother—he's awfully afraid of upsetting scenes."

Anna rose and went up to her. "Oh, don't distrust him, Gay," she said. Her face was troubled. She had the feeling that if she were engaged to Michael no bitterness of long separation could ever teach her to distrust him.

"He hasn't time to think of me. And he's far too fond of May not to listen to her in the end. She's got an extraordinary influence over him."

She had a perfectly clear grasp of the situation, and did not attempt to deceive herself or to minimize the forces that were at work secretly to separate

them. Rodney and May had been inseparable as children, and even since her marriage the old intimacy had in no way diminished. Rodney and Chingford got on well together, and he wouldn't be likely to forego all that their friendship meant to him by a rash marriage with a penniless girl. He was keen and ambitious now, realizing, perhaps, what an important thing marriage was in a man's career. He could no longer be the same heedless boy who had vowed to love her forever. Oh, it was all of no use! . . . She left Anna abruptly and ran towards the house. She burst into tears—those tears she shed so seldom, and which seemed to sear and scald her eyes.

Since her return to Sant' Elena, Anna had renewed her old friendship with Countess Selvi and her son, Benedetto. He was now a charming young man of twenty-two, very dark and athletic-looking. He frequently walked down the hill to visit the two girls, and often, too, they went up to the Villa Selvi to tea, and to play tennis in the evening.

The Villa Selvi was a large and sumptuous abode, standing upon a hill above the town, in its own beautiful woodland of chestnuts, olives, pines and ilex-trees. The countess had lived there all through her brief married life and long widowhood. English by birth, she had been born and bred in Italy, and her point of view had therefore become almost wholly Italian.

She was a faded blonde, looking younger than her years, the exact number of which she had never been known to divulge. Benedetto was a devoted and dutiful son, very Italian in his attitude towards "Mamma." It was said that she had refused several offers of marriage on his account. Since her husband's death the boy had been all her world.

And although she had been born an English-

woman, the countess encouraged her son's dutiful Italian attitude. She believed that it would save trouble later on when important matters, such as marriage, had to be discussed and settled.

It was not long before Anna discovered, rather to her secret amusement and very much to her relief, that although Benny came over ostensibly to visit her and bring her messages from his mother, it was really Gay whom he wished to see. Anna was not at all sorry for this. The intervals between those Indian letters were becoming longer and longer, and even she had begun to doubt if the engagement would ever come to anything. For this reason she hoped that Benedetto would take a serious liking to Gay.

Very soon Gay's own attitude began to puzzle her. No one in Sant' Elena knew anything of her secret engagement to Rodney Nugent, and certainly no one, to watch her with Benny now, would dream that she was otherwise than perfectly free. Presently they began to go about together, unaccompanied by Anna. They went for long walks down the valley and then up to the remote villages that lay half hidden in the hills. Sometimes they walked over the headlands, or spent hours rowing on that calm blue sea. Benny had a motor-boat of his own, and this was often in requisition, though it had to be used more circumspectly since the countess was apt to question the engineer, especially if much gasoline had been consumed.

Gay became much less restless. She seemed to be enjoying this new phase of her existence. Anna did not trouble to ask herself what the countess would think of it. Perhaps, indeed, she knew and approved. She showed, at any rate, no signs of interfering, and during the whole of that first radiant summer at Sant' Elena, Gay and Benny were constantly in each other's society.

The days went by very quickly indeed, the weeks became months, summer gave place to a wonderful golden autumn. The hillsides flamed with the crimson and bronze of the chestnut woods, the bright, spreading gold of the bracken. There were mists in the early morning, and a cool fresh nip in the air that was refreshing after the long weeks of uninterrupted heat. Chrysanthemums, salvias and dahlias made brilliant patches of color in the garden, and on the terrace overlooking the sea.

Anna had gone out on to the terrace one afternoon early in November. The day had been warm, and a rather sickly sirocco was blowing from the south. She had been alone since the morning, for Benny had come to fetch Gay in the motor-boat to go to Genoa. It was a long run, but the sea was calm; if the wind got up they intended to return by train.

As she stood there she heard a motor-car drive along the road and stop abruptly by the gate. In a few minutes she saw old Francesca hurrying along the path, followed by another figure whom even in the distance she recognized as Countess Selvi.

"Where are they, Anna?" she cried, without further preliminary. The question seemed to indicate a certain degree of anxiety and perturbation.

"Do you mean Gay and Benny?" asked Anna.

"Of course! Do you know where they are?"

"They've gone to Genoa."

"And Benny said he was going over to San Gervasio for the day! I felt something was wrong, for Marchesa Verani said she was certain she saw him in the motor-boat this morning, going very swiftly towards Genoa. She said he had a girl with him—very dark with black hair and wearing no hat. She assured me they were quite alone except for

the two men. I particularly asked if you were there—I was so sure you always went with them."

"Not lately—I don't care for such long days. And I've been busy in the garden."

"My dear, do tell me who *is* this Miss Lawton? Is she a very intimate friend of yours? Have you known her a long time?"

"She's a friend of mine—I knew her in London. She used to teach me."

"She is here as your paid companion, I suppose?"

Anna nodded.

"Benny is falling in love with her. Never in his life has he gone off for whole days with a girl! And I can't have it! I know very little of her, but what I have seen I don't like. . . . I do not wish to offend you, Anna, but there is a touch of the adventuress!"

"Oh, I think you are wronging her," said Anna, chilled at the words. Yet was it not true that, given the circumstances, she had herself felt puzzled by Gay's eagerness to make these long expeditions with Selvi?

The countess's attitude reminded her irresistibly of Mrs. Nugent's when she had discovered her son's engagement to Miss Lawton. There was the same inflexible conviction that it "wouldn't do."

"Only, I don't think you need feel at all afraid," she went on, anxious to pacify these troubled waters. "Gay is engaged to one of my cousins."

"Well, all I can say is then that she has no right to be going on with Benny as she is doing. I am not at all accustomed to these English ways—I dislike them very much. I am sure he doesn't know that she is engaged. Is the marriage likely to take place soon?"

There was a note of incredulity in her voice which did not escape Anna.

"No, I shouldn't think so. It's all very indefinite. My uncle and aunt don't approve of it. It's been very hard on her to have to wait so long and in such uncertainty."

"Perhaps her patience is becoming exhausted," said the countess dryly. "But I shall tell Benny that she is engaged. I consider that he ought to know it."

"Oh, don't do that!" cried Anna, a little aghast. "Perhaps she doesn't wish it. You see it's all been so private and secret—she never tells anyone. I knew, because I was living there at the time. I didn't mean to betray her confidence."

"I am very glad you told me," said the countess, "and I think it only fair to Benny that he should know it, too. And I'm not going to let him marry a girl without a *soldo*!"

Anna was, by this time, beginning to feel extremely distressed. She felt sure that Gay would be very angry with her for mentioning her engagement to the countess. And evidently she liked Benedetto, and perhaps she had purposely kept the information from him. She had certainly been much happier at Sant' Elena since she had had this friendship to amuse her.

He was not rich, but if he married with his mother's approval there would be quite enough. Besides, it was known that he had expectations from a strange old misanthropic uncle in New York, a brother of the countess whom she had not seen for many years.

"I have often wondered why you chose Miss Lawton to come here as your companion," continued Countess Selvi, fretfully, "she has such a cool off-hand manner, such a strange way of speaking to people older than herself. English people have very odd manners sometimes, but I really don't think she is quite a lady."

Anna felt indignant, but she said nothing, wisely

making allowances for maternal anxiety. She had herself watched the progress of the affair with some interest, never asking herself if the countess would be likely to approve of it or not. Benedetto was a young man of two and twenty, and therefore presumably knew what he was about. For Gay's sake she had felt glad, since it seemed more and more useless for her to wait for Rodney, wasting her youth as she was now doing. Besides, Anna was beginning to see quite plainly that Gay would never be happy leading this quiet life alone with her at Villa Caterina. She needed some excitement, and Benny had supplied it. Since he had come almost daily to take her off on some expedition by land or sea, her gloom and discontent had vanished.

Often of late they had started quite early, and Gay had not returned to the Villa Caterina till it was past dinner time, and the lights were shining in the little port and the lighthouse on the quay was flashing out its friendly warnings to its bigger neighbor on the brow of San Gervasio.

"And, of course, if she's only amusing herself that makes it all the worse," continued the countess. "I shall take him away. He will soon forget her. We can always go to our villa at Menaggio."

Once she had hoped that perhaps Benny and Anna. . . . She had known the girl nearly all her life and had been extremely fond of her father—too fond, gossip said, for her own peace of mind. She realized that though Anna was so young, she was wise and dependable; she was a good Catholic, had a little money, and altogether would make Benny a charming wife. It was, indeed, in this hope that she had encouraged her son to go so frequently to the Villa Caterina, little dreaming what use he was making of his liberty.

This affair with Miss Lawton must be peremp-

torily stopped. She had not as yet remonstrated with her son, because it was only that morning that her suspicions had been thoroughly aroused, but she felt that the moment had now come when a parental rebuke was necessary.

She had not cared very greatly for Mrs. Nugent on the one occasion when she had met her four years ago, but now she could not help feeling a strong sense of sympathy for her. Gay had evidently entangled young Nugent into an engagement which his parents had most wisely put a stop to. At least they had been able to stave off the marriage until now, and judging by what she knew she thought it most unlikely that it would ever take place. She had no pity for Gay—a girl who so obviously refused to learn her lesson!

"Do you mean they always go off like this alone?" she asked, astonished at Anna's calm acceptance of the situation.

"Well, I don't often go with them," Anna confessed reluctantly.

At first, it is true, she had always accompanied them as a matter of course, but one day Gay had said something to show her that her presence was no longer welcome to them, so that she had always afterward made an excuse for remaining at home.

"You should have told me, Anna! I hadn't the least idea. It wasn't friendly of you—you might have known I shouldn't like it."

The countess had hardly said these words when the motor-boat appeared churning its way toward the little landing-stage that belonged to the Villa Caterina. Soon the two tall forms of Benny and Gay were seen coming up the steps that led to the terrace where the countess and Anna were sitting. Their voices and laughter ceased abruptly when they became aware of the presence of these two ladies. All three faces seemed to betray a kind of astonished

dismay, but Gay's was the coolest of them. She advanced towards Countess Selvi and held out her hand, that was tanned such a dark brown. The countess barely touched it with her own; she glanced at Gay without a smile. Benny looked slightly shame-faced, for he had been very careful to keep all knowledge of his flirtation from his mother. He knew that she didn't like Gay and thought her too modern and independent in her outlook. He was aware now from her expression, that she was extremely displeased, and a faint mutinous feeling stirred within his breast.

Countess Selvi rose. "I've paid you a long visit, Anna," she said frigidly, "and Benny and I must be going home. I have the car here—you can come with me," she added, turning to her son.

She said good-bye to Anna, gave Gay the stiffest of bows, and took her departure.

When they had gone, Gay flung herself into a wicker chair.

"How long have you had that boring old woman here, Anna? What on earth did she come for?"

It was evident that she suspected the countess's visit concerned herself.

For a moment Anna was silent. She felt that when Gay should learn the truth she would be annoyed. She said at last:

"Some friends of hers saw you in the motor-boat going towards Genoa this morning. She thought, you see, that I always went with you."

Gay stared at her, and then gave a little short, mirthless laugh.

"What did you say?"

"I told her that you were engaged to Rodney. You see, she was worried about you and Benny."

Gay looked at Anna with an ugly light in her eyes.

"How dare you interfere with me like that? What business is it of yours, or anyone's, if I choose to go

out with Benny? You had no right to tell her I was engaged!"

She uttered the sentences like a succession of pistol shots. All the time she was gazing at Anna with something like hatred in her eyes.

"Oh, Gay, *don't!*" Anna entreated.

"You know I've never told anyone here of my engagement. You shouldn't have mentioned it!"

"I'm sorry I told her, since you didn't want her to know. But she thinks that you and Benny——"

"Benny!" said Gay, with a snort of contempt. "He happens to be the only man we know in this benighted hole who can speak a word of English!"

Anna flinched. She had often felt that Gay secretly hated Sant' Elena, and that at times she felt bored to death there. But to hear her call it a "benighted hole" filled her now with a kind of dismay, as if their very life together there were being threatened.

"Do you suppose I'd go about with him if there was anyone else?" inquired Gay, scathingly. "Do you suppose I should be here at all, if you Nugents hadn't treated me so shamefully?"

"Oh, Gay!" said Anna, in despair.

"And now I suppose that old woman will take Benny away and I shan't even have him to go out with. He doesn't know I'm engaged, and it'll be a blow to him when she tells him. You've made a nice mess of things, Anna!"

"I'm sorry," said Anna, simply. She looked wistfully across the Bay, beginning to be colored now with a faint rosy light, as the sun dipped behind the western headlands. The faintly-wrinkled silver surface of the water seemed to absorb those new delicate tones as if they were being melted into it.

Anna was thinking sadly: "She isn't happy here—she hates it. Of course, it's dull for her. She'll go

as soon as she gets the chance." She had so eagerly looked forward to living at Villa Caterina with Gay. . . .

"I never dreamed you'd give me away like that," said Gay, rising and going toward the house. "What a little cat you are, Anna!"

It was never quite the same after that little scene between the two girls on the terrace, although they soon settled down to conditions of apparent harmony. Anna never bore malice; she freely forgave those angry impetuous words of Gay's and was sorry that her disclosure had had such immediate and drastic consequences. For the countess bore her beloved son off to Menaggio without delay. They had property there, and she was able to impress upon Benny the urgent necessity of visiting it. They intended to spend the winter there. Benny apparently accepted the situation with philosophy, and he made no attempt to see Gay again before they went. Perhaps the news of her engagement to another man had disillusioned him. Anna began to think there had not been much in the affair after all.

"Benny's as bored with Sant' Elena as I am," Gay confessed one day. "He's always wanted to live in Rome or Florence. But he'll be much more bored at Menaggio in the winter," she added, almost as if the thought were a gratifying one.

She, too, seemed to accept the new situation with calmness. She had always known that Countess Selvi didn't like her, and, of course, she had secretly observed that that adoring mother had wished to bring about a marriage between Benny and Anna. Benny had indeed confided this to her in a moment of unusual expansion.

The winter was rather a trying one for Anna. The weather was very wet, though it was hardly ever cold. But the rain flooded the rivers, whose stony beds in

summer were almost wholly destitute of water, and much distress prevailed in the neighboring villages. Old Francesca was ill, and her son Italo, who did most of the work, was obliged to ask for someone to help him. Gay was frankly bored by these domestic worries, and her restlessness and irritability grew upon her.

It was a relief to them all when spring came, bringing with it brighter weather and lengthening days.

## CHAPTER VI

### NEWS FROM LONDON

#### I

APRIL had come round again, and now it was a whole year since Anna had left London. It had not been an altogether successful year, and she was certainly not nearly so happy living with Gay as she had expected to be. Gay didn't seem to care for any of Anna's friends in Sant' Elena; she refused to go to the winter tea-parties, of which there were always a great many, and she never attempted to help her with any of the household problems. She made various attempts to find another post that would take her to a more amusing place, but nothing came of it. Rodney seemed to have given up writing to her altogether.

Anna suspected that Benny's cure was not yet complete, as the countess had not returned to the Villa Selvi.

Then one day there came a bolt from the blue, in the shape of an unusually long letter, full of gossip, from Mrs. Nugent. At the end she added: "Rodney has come home—he arrived early in the new year. He hadn't been very well, but he picked up quite wonderfully on the voyage. He is staying down at Wakebourne with May. Stella is there too—she is the prettiest little creature you ever saw. Just nineteen, and full of charm and fun. I am so in hopes that something may come of it."

A sudden chill came over Anna. She had seen

Lady Stella once, an exquisite little creature, rather like the star her name suggested, bright and glancing. She was full of gayety, and a kind of naïve child-like aplomb, that would certainly have their effect upon Rodney. May would encourage the marriage; her little sister-in-law adored her, was constantly with her, and would therefore be ready, in any case, to regard Rodney with favor because he was her brother. Whether the Wendles would approve was another matter, but they were not too well off, and Athelstan had made generous settlements when May herself was married; it might be that this sordid consideration would have its weight. On the other hand, Stella was their youngest child, and the adored of both parents.

"Why, Anna, what's the matter? You look as white as a sheet! Have you had bad news?"

Gay came into the loggia. She was wearing a white knitted jumper, made very loose, with short sleeves, and a short dark blue serge skirt. She would probably go out soon, as was her wont, and row for hours upon the sea. Since the fine weather had set in she had become practically amphibious, spending most of her time bathing and boating. The Italians were astonished to see the Englishwoman swimming in that cold rough sea, so early in the season.

Her face was tanned now to a rich brown. She looked like a gipsy—a handsome, defiant, bold gipsy.

"I've heard from Aunt Juliet."

"Well, what does she say?"

Gay sat down. She had a dreadful presentiment that some ill news was going to be imparted.

"Rodney's come back. He's staying with May at Wakebourne."

"Come back?" repeated Gay, incredulously.

"Yes."

"I suppose Mrs. Nugent's overjoyed?"

"Yes, I think so. She says he hasn't been well, but he's better—he picked up on the voyage. He's been back since just after the new year."

"Since the new year!" repeated Gay. She flushed all over her little brown face. She seldom wore a hat, and let the Italian sun do its will with her complexion. But the gipsy-like darkness suited her; it seemed to go well with that boyish athletic look, the muscular strength of her thin brown arms.

"He never said a word to me about coming," she said bitterly.

"Perhaps—if he hears we're here, he may come," said Anna, with a hopefulness she was very far from feeling. If only Gay would see that there was no hope, and write to Rodney giving him back his freedom, she felt it would have been so much more dignified. Not clinging like this to the last frail spar of hope. . . .

"Not he! He'll stay with May the whole summer. Happy endings don't come off in real life, you innocent baby!"

Anna had an inflexible belief in the constancy of love. It was a thing that grasped you, held you, took possession of you in a queer, forcible, fierce way. You couldn't free yourself, even if you wanted to. But at least you could give back freedom to the one who desired it, even though you could not fling off your own chains that gnawed into your flesh.

But she felt that if she said anything of this to Gay, she would only laugh at her.

"You'd think he'd have written, wouldn't you? He might have had a little consideration for the person he professed to love. But you see just how ignoble he is! Not to be trusted. Letting himself be ruled by May. . . . I tell you he's behaved to me like a coward—a faithless coward!" Her dark eyes flashed. "Oh, Anna—you saw him that night in

London! He did care then, didn't he? And I felt so sure of him. . . ."

"Yes, I'm quite sure he cared. . . ." She could see him now, holding out his arms to Gay with a gesture of tenderness not to be mistaken, calling to her in a choked voice, vibrant with passion. And Gay going toward him, to be clasped in those arms. The scene was etched upon her mind; she could visualize it in every detail.

Gay stooped down and kissed her, as if in gratitude for that word of confirmation.

Anna stroked her hand. "How miserable she is," she thought.

Gay went away abruptly, giving her short skirt a little swing. She was ashamed now of her outburst, ashamed, too, that she had disclosed so much of her secret bitterness to Anna. For it wasn't the first time she had coldly and deliberately faced the probability of Rodney's ultimate faithlessness. She had always been contending against forces stronger than herself, had known that the odds were against her, and that Rodney's relations would certainly triumph in the end. May . . . she hated May, with her cold beauty, her heartlessness, her love for Rodney that made her wish to rule him. She might have known that May would ultimately defeat her.

All of a sudden she felt that she hated this smiling southern place, with its sunshine, its invariable beauty, its blue sea and sky, its laughing light and water. It seemed to mock her with its joy and loveliness, and grace of blossoming. She would rather have been by the gray, cruel North Sea, where the shrill easterly wind flogged one's face as with stinging lashes, and the tumbling waves all crowned with yellow yeasty foam looked fierce and wrathful and menacing. Here she felt as if she were the one tempestuous, defiant, unhappy thing. . . .

Even Anna was calm. Yet, surely, she had not left London utterly without hurt. Gay remembered her childish, hero-worshiping devotion to Michael Nugent, who had been so consistently kind to her when she was a little lonely girl in that great strange house. Perhaps it had not been so very easy for Anna to know herself so utterly separated from him, however fraternal the relation between them may have been. Yet sometimes it hurt Gay to see Anna's tranquil calmness.

. . . So Rodney was back in England after these years of absence. She could picture him there, his arrival, the fuss they would make, and how he would love it all. Then his eagerness to dash off to Wakebourne to see May, if indeed she had not gone to London to meet him. . . . Gay felt thankful she wasn't in England to be hurt by his negligence and insulted by his apologies. She ran lightly along the path to the terrace, and then down the steep steps to the landing-stage below the cliff. She took the boat out and rowed far into the Bay, putting all her energy into those strong, rhythmic strokes. She wanted to exhaust herself with this violent physical exercise, so that she would feel so tired there would be no room for pain. For just now her body and soul were given over utterly to pain, so that once or twice, when she was well out of hearing she uttered little sharp cries like a wild animal caught in a cruel trap.

Shelley had been drowned not very far from here — just across the Bay, beyond the great headland of Spezia. All the sailors here said that storms came up very quickly and with sudden violence, overwhelming the frail little fishing craft with tragic unexpectedness. It made Gay wish then that such a storm would spring up, defying that bright blue sky, and submerge her little craft. She toyed with the thought of this

beautiful swift ending, painless and kindly. She had always envied Shelley. . . .

For some weeks there was no further news from England. Gay spent her time almost wholly out of doors, and Anna saw but little of her. There was some talk of Mrs. Phipps-Moxon coming to Sant' Elena on her way home from Florence, where she had been spending the winter, and Anna thought, and even hoped, that she would once more be able to evolve some plan for Gay's future. Certainly she was unlikely to spend a second winter at Villa Caterina. She needed, as one could see, some settled and strenuous occupation to which she would be compelled to devote both time and thought. Her present rather purposeless life, spent for the most part in violent physical exercise, was not good for her. She was restless, irritable, discontented. . . .

It was a burning afternoon towards the middle of May. The heat was intense, even here in this spot so persistently fanned by cool sea-breezes. The acacias, with their white bridal robes, filled the air with fragrance. Magnolias displayed splendid creamy cups, like chalices filled with scent, amid great bronzed leaves. The oleanders lifted rose-colored clusters against the fierce blue of the sky. One might have thought that their fragile limp blossoms would have been burnt to cinders in that fiery heat, instead of which, the hotter it became, the more prodigally they flowered on the summits of their gray-green thickets. They were beautiful all through the summer, even when the other flowers had been parched and withered by the sun's fierce caress.

Anna was in the loggia when a telegram was brought to her. She had thought it too hot to sit out of doors on the terrace, even in the shade, so had taken her work and writing materials into the loggia. Gay had gone out for a swim, rowing the boat far

into the Bay and then taking a plunge from it, as was her dangerous practice.

Anna opened the telegram and, to her astonishment, read these words:

*Am coming out to see Gay prepare her for  
Rodney's engagement—Michael.*

Despite the heat outside, she felt that she could not remain indoors. She put on a hat, and, still holding the telegram in her hand, went across the terrace and down the steps that were cut out of the tufa cliff to the landing-stage. She sat there in the shade, on the top of a flat rock, a favorite haunt of hers, and where she was little likely to be disturbed. The waves were breaking languidly with a full, sucking sound against the dark rim of the rocks, that looked rather like shaggy sea-beasts that had risen to the surface from some watery lair. The water was so close to her that she had only to stretch out her hand to receive its cool caress.

Far off in the silver haze of heat, Anna could see the white coast towns glimmering like ivory cities against a background of blue and green. Above them rose the great protecting wall of mountains, beyond which on clearer days she could discern the lofty silhouettes of higher and more remote peaks soaring towards the sky. Far off too, the great headland near Spezia thrust its bold arm into the sea, while the rocky marble island of Palmaria lay just beyond it, as if it had been flung off from the mainland. Northward the great violet promontory of San Gervasio formed with the other headland a wide and beautiful bay, safe, sheltered, and rimmed with lovely little cities each grouped around a slender medieval campanile.

To-day the sea was calm and of a pale silver blue

traversed by broad paths of light that looked almost like wide, white roads flung across it.

The groves of pine and cypress and ilex in the garden above sheltered Anna from the sun. A cool wind blew from the sea, fanning her.

Mingling with her intense joy at the thought of seeing Michael again was the pain and disappointment she felt for Gay. However clearly she had realized in these past months that Rodney had grown weary of the engagement, Anna felt certain that in her heart she had always believed, and was indeed still hoping against hope, that he would eventually return to her. And now Gay was going to be hurt. The blow she had dreaded was about to fall. Hope that had been dying so agonizingly, so slowly in her heart, was to bleed to death no more. It was to receive a brutal death wound. Rodney was going to be married. She would know soon how utterly he had ceased to care. When Anna read the telegram again, her heart stood still. She dreaded that moment of disclosure, the infliction of the death-blow. There had been so little real pressure brought to bear by his parents, however much Gay might blame them. Time and separation had done their own cruel work. If only Gay on her side could have ceased to care!

But in her wayward passionate way, Gay still loved him. And again that scene in the schoolroom rose involuntarily before Anna's eyes. She wondered if Gay often thought of it. For child as she herself had been at the time, she felt that she could never forget it, or cease to believe that an emotion so sincere, so authentic, so passionate, could perish only with life itself. . . .

How should she prepare her? She shrank from the task. Michael was cruel to have thrust it upon her. But then he did not know—how should he?—that since coming to Sant' Elena the two girls had

drifted, in some sense, apart. Since the episode of Benny, they had no longer been such close friends, so intimate and affectionate. Gay was reserved to Anna. She had been angry with her for telling Countess Selvi of her engagement, and ever since then she had treated her with reticence and a cold caution. This alone made it much more difficult for Anna to obey Michael now.

A white sail skimmed past, like a patch of snow against the blue. The boat was painted bright green and white, and the man who was sitting in it, handling the sails with such deft ease, wore a white blouse, shaped like a sailor's. Over the sparkling expanse of water the sun was flinging millions of diamond-like points of light that stung and dazzled the eyes.

Far out to sea, she could see a boat and near it a tiny dark bubble moving in the water. Gay was still swimming in the warm blue water. But soon she would be coming in. It would be terrible—that meeting, with this new knowledge cold and sinister between them. Gay would be certain to discern that there was something amiss as soon as she saw her. Her intuition, her uncanny power of thought-reading, were as unfailing as ever.

Above her head Anna could see the boughs of ilex and pine brushed delicately against the sky, and hanging over the balustrade of the terrace a rim of scarlet geraniums made a fiery patch of color that looked almost like a narrow rippling sheet of flame.

If Anna had been a selfish woman, apt to surround herself with physical luxury and comfort, like Mrs. Nugent, to the point of excluding all things that could possibly annoy or pain or impair that comfort, especially such as concerned the anxieties and perplexities of others, she would perhaps by this time have learnt to regret definitely the presence of Gay Lawton in her new life. But for her, that life would

have been so tranquil. Gay clouded its calm and serenity. She was not an easy person to live with; she was restless, self-centered, critical, unloving. She hated the quiet life and the absence of all amusement and excitement. She was indifferent to the beauty of her surroundings. She did not attempt to study or read—she who had worked so hard at school and college, passing her examinations with such ease and brilliancy. No, she had simply spent her time waiting for Rodney, and now Rodney had definitely failed her. Michael was coming out to tell her so.

The little tragedy of her love-affair had rendered her perverse and difficult, but Anna was far too sweet-tempered to resent all this. She had borne with Gay because she really wanted to help her. Gay's angularity and unresponsiveness wounded her at times, but she always made abundant excuses for her.

And in a sense she had profited by Gay's example. Never, never, she resolved, would she let herself go in the way Gay had done, so that the best years of her youth had been made desolate by a man's negligence and ultimate faithlessness. From this close contemplation of Gay, her growing hardness and fierce defiance, her hostility toward a world which she considered had treated her ill, Anna had learnt a singularly useful lesson. It had taught her to keep the thought of Michael well at bay. And because she had not dared to think of him either very often or very deeply, she felt that it would be all the easier now to meet him on terms of cool friendship.

For were there not many beautiful things in the world besides love, which on the temporal plane was the most beautiful of them all? These were days when a woman's life could be planned on free and large lines, could be filled as full of interests as she chose to make it. And then there was one's religion

with all its richness of thought and learning, its heritage of wisdom, its mysticism and divine consolations and grace. And if that were allowed to play the part designed for it, the most important part in a human life, there was but little scope for pining and fretting over the temporal things one had missed.

This alone, without the aid of Gay's experience, would have taught Anna to endure whatever hurt might have come to her through the complete separation from Michael.

She would have found it at all times difficult to be very unhappy here in Sant' Elena, living in the beloved home of her childhood, amid such wealth of radiant blossoming, surrounded by green vineyard and gray olive-orchard; the blue of sea and sky; the white flowers blooming in the dusk, distilling fragrance; the glory of the southern sunshine.

"It'll be lovely showing it all to Michael," she thought. "And he'll understand why, all those years in London, I dreamed of coming back."

A boat had suddenly come round the point and was nearing the landing-stage. Gay was sitting in it, wearing a crimson wrap over her bathing dress, and a crimson cap on her dark hair.

"Anna!" she called, in her deep, husky voice.

Anna went round to the landing-stage to help her bring in the boat, fastening it to one of the big iron rings.

Then they climbed the steep, slippery steps up to the terrace.

"Isn't it a 'divine day?'" said Gay, throwing off her cap and displaying her black hair slightly frosted over with spray. "I had a gorgeous swim. You ought to have come." She threw herself into a wicker chair piled up with cushions of various hues.

"I've been a perfect beast lately, Anna; you must forgive me. I wonder you've been able to put up with

me so patiently. But to-day I feel almost happy again—just as if something frightfully nice was going to happen to me. Do you believe in presentiments? I think they're all tosh as a rule, but to-day. . . ." She fixed her dark bright eyes almost dreamily upon the perfect scene before her.

Her face was turned a little away from Anna, who noticed, for the first time and almost with a pang, how sharpened the line was between ear and chin.

"Well, something *is* going to happen, Gay. Michael is coming."

"Michael?" Gay repeated incredulously.

The blood rushed to her face, darkening it rather than reddening it. Any word of Rodney's family was welcome to her then; she had been starved for news so long. Since his return to England he had never once written to her. She believed that he was engaged in a conflict, and until he had either triumphed or suffered defeat, he would make no sign to her.

But Michael? . . . He was coming to see Anna, of course. They had always been friends, and she had wondered sometimes why he had permitted such a long time to elapse without looking her up and seeing for himself how she was getting on in her new life. Suddenly she envied Anna. There was something steady and upright and very reliable about Michael Nugent which would encourage a woman to love him without fear—and without shame. . . .

"I must say you don't look overjoyed about it, Anna," she said, gazing at her curiously. "Didn't you want him just now?"

"Oh, yes, of course I do," said Anna, with a little effort, "it'll be delightful having him—I've always wanted him to see the villa—" All the time she was thinking: "I can't tell her—I can't. Michael must

'do it—he'll be able to explain everything better than I can."

"Why's he coming?" inquired Gay.

"To see us. . . ." said Anna lamely.

"You hadn't asked him?"

"No—it's his own idea."

"Is he going to stay long?"

"He doesn't say. But he can never get away for more than a week or two."

"I should have thought you would be more pleased." Gay was struck afresh by Anna's pallor, her lack of enthusiasm, just as if the news of his coming had displeased her rather than otherwise. "I always imagined you were such friends, Anna. Don't you really want him to come?" She repeated the question with a kind of insistence. It was as if she had begun remotely to suspect some ulterior and perhaps sinister reason for Michael's visit.

"Yes, yes . . . but I'd almost rather he hadn't chosen just this moment. . . ."

"And why not this moment? It's the only time of year when Sant' Elena is bearable. He'll love swimming in that warm sea. . . . What a queer girl you are, Anna! I've often thought that some day you and Michael. . . ."

And she looked at Anna steadily with her penetrating dark eyes.

Anna laughed.

"I should like to see Aunt Juliet's face!"

But Gay flushed again, this time with anger.

"That boring, wicked, interfering, meddling old woman! I wonder her sons don't rebel!"

"Oh, don't, Gay dear," pleaded Anna.

"Wait till she puts her fat finger into your pie!" said Gay with ironical emphasis. "She's such a hypocrite too. Always pretending to be half asleep

when she's really wide-awake and Argus-eyed, and plotting mischief all the time!"

Anna was shocked at this unflattering interpretation of her aunt's character, the more so because there was a decided element of truth in it. Only Anna could never believe that Mrs. Nugent ever wished to harm anyone; there was no malice in her nature. She merely wanted to act as Providence to her three children, and even if they suffered now, she could always tell herself that she had only wished to save them from worse suffering in the future.

"Don't let her come between you and Michael, that's all," said Gay, warningly.

Anna started a little. For had she not already and even long ago come between them? Hadn't Michael been swiftly removed from a scene that seemed to spell danger, while her own departure for Sant' Elena was effected as rapidly as possible? When Anna thought of this, she wondered why Michael had been encouraged to come out on this peculiarly delicate mission. Perhaps it was because he would certainly return home as soon as it was accomplished.

"I'm sure he'll think you've grown ever so much prettier, Anna," said Gay, regarding her with a sort of humorous though critical kindness. "This place suits you. Besides, you were such a child when you left London—I daresay he hardly realized you were grown up."

She slipped her hand in Anna's arm and they walked back to the house together.

"He'll bring me news of Podney," Gay was thinking.

Yes, he would break that cold long silence that seemed to lie so heavily upon her heart, chilling it.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE COMING OF MICHAEL

#### I

MICHAEL was to arrive early. Anna resolved to go to the station herself to meet him, and she purposely did not invite Gay to accompany her. She had to tell him that she had been a coward, that she hadn't been able to prepare Gay. Always, too, she had had the feeling that Gay would bear the shock far better if the news were communicated to her by Michael. It was impossible, Anna felt, not to exercise some degree of self-control in the presence of that cold, slightly caustic manner, and under the gaze of those kindly but penetrating eyes. That was the best of Michael, she reflected; he strung you up to a higher pitch. He wasn't one of those people who worked on your feelings, evoking a morbid sentimentalism. You felt that he possessed an invincible courage together with immense reserves of self-control and resource, and he seemed to impose those very qualities, though perhaps in a less perfect degree, upon those with whom he had to deal. Even Aunt Juliet and May hadn't been quite free from this stern influence. That was why they so seldom took Michael into their confidence; they were unable to bear his disapproval. And with it all he was the least priggish, as he was certainly the simplest, of men.

Anna was afraid of Gay's violence of emotion,

perhaps of invective. She wouldn't spare the Nugents. But Michael would control and check all manifestations of despair and hostility.

The morning was cool and fine. Somewhere in the mountains rain must have fallen, so that the air that flowed down to the valleys and coast was refreshed and chilled. The great bold headland by Spezia was like a transparent shadow, and scarcely less shadow-like were the cool gray silhouettes of the nearer mountains. The sea was very pale, flat and calm; its voice came as a mere rhythmic whisper. The air was almost heady at that early hour, pure and buoyant, sweet with the scent of flowers on mountain passes, and brackish from the sea.

Anna paced up and down the platform of the little station, waiting for the train from Genoa. There were few people there. A tall man, who looked English, in a gray tweed suit, stood beside a couple of suitcases and a canvas bag containing golf-clubs. An old woman shivered in a thin alpaca coat. Some porters in blue blouses loitered together in a group, talking in that violent, exclamatory, vociferating manner which so often sounds like serious quarreling to the foreigner. Their rapid speech and gestures—the flashing of their expressive black eyes—seemed to confirm that false impression of anger.

The train appeared quite suddenly emerging from a tunnel. A door was flung open and a tall form leaped out. It was Michael.

"Anna!"

Michael was standing before her, and her first feeling was that he was ever so much taller than she had pictured him; he seemed to tower above her. Anna felt quite cold with excitement and emotion. Despite all her resolutions the sight of him brought a joy that was almost overwhelming.

She put out her hand and felt it grasped firmly by

his. She hoped that he could not feel its involuntary trembling.

"Have you much luggage, Michael?" she asked.

"No—a bag and suitcase. That porter took them. I say, what a jolly place!"

"Oh, I'm so glad you like it. We can walk down to the villa if you'd rather. That man will bring your things."

They halted for a moment at the *'dogana'*, and then proceeded down the steep short hill that led to the shore. Anna glanced at Michael when they came in sight of the pink house standing on its own little rocky promontory embowered in glossy dark trees. "That's the Villa Caterina," she said simply. She felt as if some part, at least, of her girlish dreams were coming true, and that for months she had been waiting for this moment. Just to watch the effect of all this sweet pure loveliness upon Michael Nugent.

His face shone with pleasure. "Why, how simply topping! You're right on the sea. One could almost take a header out of the window!"

Both felt they did not want to speak of Gay. She was lurking like a shadow in the background, the one thing that wasn't in tune with the scene before them. But the very thought of her, present to both their minds, seemed to dim in some sort the pure splendor of the morning.

As they neared the gate and Anna was fitting her key into the lock, she turned to him abruptly and said:

"Michael—Gay may be in the garden and if she is we shall meet her. So I want you to know that I've been a coward—I haven't said a word to her. I felt I simply couldn't. It'll break her heart. You must do it." Her lips closed firmly on the words. She had the feeling, too, that the Nugents must make the best case they could for Rodney. It seemed hard, though, that the disagreeable duty should devolve

upon Michael, who of them all had been least involved in the story.

Michael's face was very grave. "I shan't like it a little bit. Does she guess anything?"

"I can't tell. But Rodney ought to have written and told her plainly that he didn't care any more. After all, it's his affair! She must have been expecting it—she's cried over the change in his letters—and now his utter silence since he's been in England—!" She stopped short. When she thought of Rodney she felt indignant.

"I tried to get him to write. But you know what old Rodney is. He hates hurting anything!"

"When he's done nothing else but hurt her all these years?" said Anna, incredulously.

"He was very young—hardly more than a boy. There's that to be said for him. And Gay was older and very determined and capable—he hadn't much chance."

"Who's he going to marry?" asked Anna. "You never told me."

"Oh, didn't I? It's Stella Belton—Ching-Chang's little sister. May's engineered the whole thing, of course. She had them down at Wakebourne for weeks together. And they're both awfully in love. The wedding is to be quite soon. In some ways she'll suit him very well, though she's rather a baby. The mater," added Michael, "is highly delighted."

"Oh, why didn't he write long ago and break with Gay?"

"He just let it fizzle out," returned Michael, "and he told me he didn't think Gay cared any more."

"But she *does* care. More and more. It's making her so hard and bitter. You'll see how changed and thin she is."

It came into his mind then that Gay had been giving Anna a pretty bad time. She, too, looked paler

and thinner than she had done in London. Perhaps her cowardice, as she called it, had been founded upon a very tangible fear of Gay.

"I'm not saying that Rodney hasn't behaved like a cad, because he has," said Michael.

They entered the garden. His first impression was one of moving through a web of cool dusky shadows flung by the soft darkness of those close-growing groves of pine and ilex and cypress, amid which white flowers showed like pale and scented stars. Then, through a sudden gap in those flaming green boughs, he saw the sea, silver-pale with the morning mists as yet not quite lifted. And hanging over the sea, standing square on its rocky promontory was the little pink villa, Anna's home, with its doors open ready to receive him.

"I told them to bring coffee out on to the terrace," said Anna. "We often have it there. Are you hungry, Michael?"

"Yes," said Michael, "I hate eating in the train. Let's have it soon, Anna. And then I must have a bath as soon as possible."

## 2

Before he left home, Mrs. Nugent had said to Michael:

"I hope you'll find that Anna is going to marry Count Selvi. I hear his mother is very keen on the match. And it would be so suitable—the properties are close together."

"Oh, well, I should think she probably will marry an Italian," said Michael, in his immovable, cold manner.

"Mrs. Phipps-Moxon says he's a most charming young man. She met them at Menaggio last year.

And then they're both Catholics," Mrs. Nugent added. She was never so apparently ingenuous as when she had something of real significance and importance to impart.

Michael registered his intention of having a look at Selyvi. He didn't like the idea, still he had resolved to keep to his original decision and leave Anna perfectly free for a whole year or even longer. She must see the world—must meet other men—he had a horror of anything like a "snap" marriage for her. But in these few months of separation he had thought a great deal about Anna, and sometimes he wished that that self-imposed period of harsh probation would come to an end a little more quickly. He hadn't intended to see her again quite so soon, but circumstances had driven him to make this journey in order to come to Rodney's assistance. It was so important that nothing of that old affair should reach Stella's ears just now. She had a keen sense of her own importance, and she had always meant to make a far more brilliant marriage than this one. May was adorable, of course, but otherwise she didn't care particularly for the Nugents. Then she had met and fallen in love with Rodney, and had even spent a miserable and forlorn fortnight believing that her love was not returned. May had come to her aid. They had always been as intimate as sisters, and May had elicited something of the truth from her. Armed with this weapon she had sought Rodney out and confronted him with it.

Rodney was a little taken aback. He was always surprised when his philandering was taken seriously. Of course he had liked Stella—jolly little thing with all that red hair. But it was another thing to have May coming to him and calmly saying: "If you do ask Stella to marry you, Rodney, you needn't be afraid of being refused."

"You know I can't," he replied.

May raised her eyebrows. "Why not?"

"There's . . . Gay Lawton."

"Oh, I thought that foolish business was over long ago. I'm sure Gay thinks it is."

"Why do you think so?"

"My dear boy, you've been at home all these weeks, and she knows you have, and you've never even tried to see her. Mamma wrote and told Anna you were back, so of course Miss Lawton knows. How long is it since you last wrote to her?"

"A few weeks before I left Bombay."

"You've made Stella think it was all at an end anyhow," said May, "and you really mustn't play fast and loose with *her*. Besides, it's time you married, Rodney." She paused, looking at him with her beautiful hard blue eyes. "Are you in love with Stella?" she asked.

"Yes, I suppose I am. But I've been in love so often. First with Gay, and then lots of others. How am I to know this is different? I don't want to get clear of one mistake in order to plunge into another." His face wore an expression of extreme doubt and misery. "No one has ever seemed quite like Gay, you know. I wish I'd married her four years ago."

"It's a mercy you didn't. She's a clever little adventuress without a penny."

He flashed out then. "She is nothing of the sort! Why are you women so down on each other? She wouldn't listen to me at first. It was all my doing, and I made her care, too."

"Does she write to you?"

"I've had one letter since I came back."

"Give it to me."

He took a flat leather case from his pocket, and extracted therefrom a single sheet of paper covered closely with Gay's small upright scholastic handwrit-

ing. To May's experienced eye the letter looked a little shabby, as if it had suffered from much re-reading. She calmly took it from her brother, and tore it across and across until her hands were full of the little square fragments. Rodney thought, as he watched her, that there was something a little cruel, a little final, in the action. It was as if she were for the last time insulting Gay, crushing her under foot. But while it hurt him with an unexpected stab of pain, he was conscious too of something of relief.

"What am I to do? Shall I write to her? She must be told, you know, if I'm to marry Stella. . . ."

"No, you mustn't write. At least not now. We'll consult Michael."

Michael suddenly confronted by his brother and sister at Lancaster Gate rebelled hotly against their proposal that he should help them out of the difficulty. It was, however, obviously impossible that Rodney should go, for "that woman," as May called her, would inevitably renew the old spells, and this time he would be powerless to escape from their magic. He was weak, and no one knew this better than his sister. It was the prospect of the journey to Sant' Elena and of seeing Anna once more and ascertaining for himself that she was happy in her new life, that made Michael finally agree to go. He didn't like it, of course. He knew Gay so very slightly, and always he had had the feeling that she had been very harshly treated. But May was able to persuade him that the whole affair had fizzled out long ago, and that the part he had to play was the negligible one of telling Gay that his brother was going to marry another woman. But he could not be made to see that Rodney had behaved otherwise than contemptibly and dishonorably. There should have been a definite rupture of the engage-

ment long ago. Instead of which Gay had been permitted to hope, to fear, and suffer suspense, for more than three years. He was sorry for Miss Lawton, and he felt a contempt for Rodney that seemed to make any renewal of their past brotherly intimacy impossible.

Mrs. Nugent was already purring like a contented cat over the possibility of the engagement; she alluded to it both to Michael and his father, but never in Rodney's presence. One was never sure of Rodney, what he intended, how much he meant. Michael suspected May of encouraging the match with Stella Belton. Stella from childhood had adored her lovely sister-in-law, and very often one saw such adoration transferred in later years to a brother, or near relation of the idol, who appeared illuminated by some reflex glory. Stella had probably been quite prepared to fall in love with Rodney; perhaps she had been prepared to fall in love with the idea of him before his appearance in the flesh. And he was sufficiently handsome and attractive, in his bright engaging way, to satisfy a young girl's ideal.

Both in London and at Wakebourne they were thrown constantly into each other's society. When they were all in London, Michael had felt oddly enough as one left out in the cold, just as though he hadn't been "smart" enough for that gay worldly milieu. He had drifted a little apart, and had become, too definitely perhaps, the hard-working business man, who, against his will, had been thrust into the position of money-maker.

It was prospering, too, that work of his, but inasmuch as it brought him no nearer to Anna, he hated and despised it.

At first he had refused point-blank to go to Sant' Elena. He wouldn't hear of it. His eyes flashed, but his rare anger evoked no corresponding emotion

in May. Like her mother she seldom permitted emotions of any kind to sway her; they were aging, unnecessary things, deleterious to complexion and expression. She only smiled and said:

"Darling Michael, of course you're going to help Rodney. Marrying Stella will be the making of him, and old Wendle has lots of influence at the War Office. The poor child is desperately in love with him, too, and Miss Lawton must have guessed the truth ages ago. We can't let him miss this brilliant marriage—it's such a help to a man in his career to have just the right sort of wife. . . ."

"And you're sure she is the right sort of wife for him?" inquired Michael, caustically. "She seems to me about as empty-headed as they make 'em!"

"Oh, Stella isn't empty-headed—she's got rather a babyish manner, that's all," said May. "Ching-Chang's awfully keen about it too, so you must really help to pull it off."

Michael was silent. He couldn't help seeing the affair from the point of view of expediency, but neither could he blind himself to the fact that his brother had treated Miss Lawton in a caddish, dishonorable manner. She must have suffered—even if she wasn't still suffering—and now he was asked to go and kill any little hope that might still linger in her heart. If it hadn't meant going to Sant' Elena and seeing Anna again, he would have utterly refused to interfere.

In the old days he had been devoted to Rodney, as to a slightly wayward, not very dependable, younger brother whom he had frequently had to help out of more or less serious scrapes. And even lately he had sent large sums to him in India, when Athelstan's patience was exhausted, to tide him over pressing financial crises. He felt he had done a good deal for him in one way and another, and that

now the "thing too much" had been demanded of him. He hated the thought of being the bearer of ill news. Stella was a charming child, but she hadn't the force of character, the grit and intellect of the older girl.

"You've always been so good to Rodney, you mustn't fail him now," murmured May, kissing the top of his dark head, "just when he needs your help so badly."

She slipped out of the room then, feeling that she had said enough. But when she saw Rodney that evening she said: "I think it'll be all right. Michael's sure to go. Partly to see Anna, and partly because he wants a holiday."

She proved to be right, for in the end Michael went.

## 3

As the ambassador of ill news, Michael felt his position keenly during the first day of his visit to the Villa Caterina. His intense desire to perform the odious task as kindly as possible gave an added touch of friendliness to his manner when he addressed Gay, and he could not help feeling that this alone would give her a perfectly wrong impression of the family attitude towards her, and even fan any lingering hope she might still cherish. Man-like, he deferred the evil hour of disclosure.

Gay from the first was, however, obviously on the defensive with Rodney's brother. She believed that he had come principally to see Anna, and yet she could not help feeling that he had some powerful secondary motive, not unconnected with herself. This visit of his was so unexpected that it could not help appearing slightly mysterious.

Michael privately thought that Gay looked charm-

ing and the picture of health, despite the fact that she was thinner and that, if one examined her face closely, there were suggestions of suffering that gave her an almost careworn appearance. But though she looked older, her beauty was not really impaired. She still had that touch of fierceness, as of some wild thing that had been caught and forcibly trained to the exigencies of civilization, with her keen dark eyes, black hair, and brown face and hands. When he saw her, Michael wished that Rodney could have stopped in Italy on his way home. There would have been no complications about Stella then; he would have appeared in England as an openly engaged man. The sight of Gay would surely have revived his ancient love. She was so little changed, and her individual charm seemed to have deepened. She was capable, independent, self-reliant—qualities that had always appealed to Rodney since he was so destitute of them himself. She was far more suited to him than that child Stella, with her babyish ways, her big innocent eyes, her tumbled red hair, and dainty, delicate apparel.

Michael was bitterly aware that Anna had joined in the family conspiracy to thrust the whole onus of the disagreeable task upon his shoulders. He was in a world of cowards, and he wasn't sure of his own nerve. It wouldn't be easy to tell Gay, and when she did know, some of the brunt of her suffering would surely fall upon Anna. He didn't want to expose Anna to that kind of thing. He was secretly a little afraid of the two girls, and wondered if their friendship would survive the fiery test to which it was to be exposed. For after all, Anna was a Nugent, a cousin of the chief delinquent in the little drama; she could not detach herself utterly from her own family, and espouse Gay's cause wholeheartedly. . . .

During his long journey he had carefully considered all that he had to say, point by point. It was none of it easy. First, he would have to tell Gay that his parents would never consent to Rodney's marrying a Catholic—they weren't prepared to admit that kind of complication into the family except under conditions to which she was little likely, as a Catholic, to accede. This seemed to him almost humorous, considering that his whole being was gradually becoming absorbed by Catholicism, and to its study he devoted all his leisure hours, even depriving himself of necessary sleep to accomplish this.

Secondly, he had to tell her what was even more difficult, that Rodney's feelings during the years of separation had undergone a change, and this was scarcely astonishing, since their initial acquaintance had been so brief and slender a thing. Rodney had been very young at the time, and some fluctuation of the kind was natural. Michael hoped to be able to induce Gay to look at the matter quite sensibly from these standpoints, but when he saw her again the hope dwindled a little. He was inwardly convinced that she hadn't changed, that she was one of the faithful ones. Perhaps she had given her love once for all. If so, she wouldn't care at all about Rodney's career and prospects; she would have been quite happy living in poverty with him so only that they might be together. She was probably quite modern in her contempt for the old standards, for the arguments prompted by expediency and prudence. She wouldn't, in short, consider what might be the Nugents' feelings on the subject . . . she might even put up a last fight—unpleasant thought! When he saw her again, tall, active, with her superb physique and tireless energy, he felt that she would have been only too glad to cook and scrub and sew for Rodney; she didn't look like a woman who minded hardship

or was afraid of manual work. Michael, realizing all this, felt his heart sink within him at the unpleasing task of "breaking it" to Gay Lawton.

They were sitting at breakfast that first morning on the terrace, when Gay appeared from the steps that led up from the sea. She was draped in her big crimson wrap, and on her head she wore a bathing cap of the same hue. These twin patches of color looked almost fiery in that early-morning world of tranquil silver and gray and deep cold green. A few wisps of dark hair peeped out from beneath the cap, glistening with drops of salt water. She had been swimming in the sea. Knowing that Michael was expected at an early hour, she had felt unusually restless, a kind of excitement and suspense at the thought of seeing Rodney's brother had taken possession of her, so she had risen early too, and had rowed the boat far out into the Bay before taking her plunge. Gay was a fearless, practiced swimmer, but Anna often felt a little alarmed when she went off like that alone, unaccompanied by a boatman.

Michael and Anna both sprang up, and Gay came toward them, tall and slender in her rough wrap, with her bare feet thrust into white bathing shoes. Her uncovered arms were spare but strong and muscular, and her face was all aglow.

"I hope you had a good journey," she said to Michael in her confident way.

"Very, thanks," said Michael, slightly embarrassed at the thought of the object of that journey.

"Don't wait breakfast for me, Anna," said Gay, moving toward the house.

As she walked away she thought: "He's more like Rodney than I thought. Their eyes and voices are alike. But one would trust Michael more, I think, and he would be harder, too, if one offended him." These reflections stabbed her as if with an

unwelcome truth. Rodney wasn't to be trusted, and in the hands of some people—of May for instance—he was like wax, soft and malleable. "And when one's a Catholic that puts the finishing touch to one's ineligibility. It's time people left off treating us like pariahs. Here it's all so different—one can see how glad Countess Selvi would be if Benny were to marry Anna," she thought bitterly.

Michael followed that glowing crimson figure with his eyes.

"She's looking charming," he said. "Rodney should have come himself. We shouldn't have heard anything about Stella then. It's half May's doing, as it is. She's backing Stella, who worships her. Gay's ever so much more suited to be Rodney's wife —she's got all the qualities he lacks. And I believe he'd have been happier with her, too."

The crimson patch disappeared into the soft gray-green shadows. They both felt that Gay must know they were speaking and thinking of her. In her manner to Michael, frank as it had been, one could detect a touch of defiance. Anna said quietly:

"Do you think she looks well? I'm afraid she isn't happy here." She made the confession almost reluctantly.

Michael did not answer. If it had not been for Anna, he felt that he would have quitted the Villa Caterina there and then. This strange happiness he was now experiencing was to be very heavily paid for. But when he looked at Anna, he felt that it was worth almost anything to be standing by her side in her own home, gazing with her upon the dreamy loveliness of the scene.

"I suppose you've found lots of old friends here?" he said, remembering the Selvi family, and his mother's ominous words concerning Anna and Benny.

"A few Italians. There aren't many of the Eng-

lish families left, only a lot of new people one had never heard of before."

"They've looked you up, I suppose—these Italians?"

"Countess Selvi came to see me at once. She was the only one I ever knew at all well; she was a friend of my father's." Anna smiled, thinking of that last hectic interview with the countess. She would have told Michael about it, but she felt that the little episode might give him an unfavorable impression of Gay.

"There's a son, isn't there?" asked Michael.

"Yes—Benedetto. He's half English and half Italian, just as I am, but you'd never think it to look at him—he's typically Italian."

"You look English out here, but in London I used to think you looked Italian," said Michael.

"Oh, but that's nearly always the way with people of mixed nationalities—they never look quite at home anywhere." She smiled. "I should like you to have seen the Selvis, Michael, but they aren't here just now and I don't quite know when they're coming back."

Michael felt inexpressibly cheered to think they were not at Sant' Elena, and that their return was uncertain. Having disposed of this question he returned to his breakfast, thinking it was the most delicious meal he had ever eaten in his life. The rolls and toast were so crisp and golden; the coffee was strong and aromatic, the butter fresh and delicious. A great bowl of crimson oleanders stood in the middle of the table, and near it was a flat dish of Venetian glass filled with peaches and figs and apricots.

Gay came out presently and joined them, dressed all in white with her dark hair uncovered. She spoke and ate little during the meal, and it seemed that

something of her hostility toward the Nugents was expressed in her silence. Why had Michael come? To see Anna? To consult her about some business? But surely that could have been done by letter. Yet business played a formidable part, as she knew, in the lives of all the Nugents.

All the time she was trying to thrust the unwelcome conviction from her that his coming concerned herself. It wasn't to see Anna at all, though that was evidently a great pleasure to him. She had never seen Michael look quite so radiant before. Generally he was grave and silent.

As soon as she had finished her coffee, she lit a cigarette and went back to the house.

## 4

"What am I to do," said Michael, "if she persists in avoiding us like this?"

"You must let her get used to the idea of your being here, first," said Anna. "Perhaps she's a little suspicious. She tried so hard to find out why you were coming and I hadn't the courage to tell her. But later you might insist upon speaking to her."

"Might I? I don't feel at present as if I ever could. . . ." He felt Gay's mood to be hostile and defiant.

"She's really, if you come to think of it, been very wonderful all this time," said Anna.

"You're as great friends as ever?"

"Well, it's different now. I'm not her pupil, you see; we're more equal. But Gay's easily offended—it hasn't always been quite smooth. You mustn't think though that I'm not very, very fond of her, because I am."

She was suddenly glad to think that Countess Selvi was away from home. She might have spoken to

Michael about the undesirability of her having Gay there as a companion. And Anna didn't want Michael to hear that unpleasant word adventuress flung at Gay Lawton. The countess disliked her, and she might have revealed something of that episode in which her son had played a part, when to an onlooker Gay had deliberately set out to capture the affection of this young man, never revealing that she was engaged to be married to someone else. No, she felt that any revelations of the kind would prejudice Michael against Gay, and make him feel that she wasn't so greatly to be pitied after all. . . .

"I wish I knew what she felt about it," said Michael.

"I'm sure she hopes that it'll come all right. I think it would be hard to give up that kind of hope," said Anna.

"Would it?" said Michael, looking at her.

Once he had thought, too; that she herself might have cherished some such secret hope, but he had rejected the idea as egoistic and complacent. Yet he had so nearly said something to Anna during their last interview before he left London. All his resolutions had threatened to break down before the prospect of that immediate and indefinite separation. His mother had come in, obviously displeased at finding him in the schoolroom, and he had often wondered what she had said to Anna during their subsequent interview. He himself had been packed off on some urgent business the following day, and he had returned home only to find Anna already gone. But so nearly had he spoken to her on that last occasion, that he believed she must have guessed at least something from his manner and voice. She was surely too sensitive, too discerning, not to have been aware of the emotion that had possessed him then. . . .

Her frank and friendly reception of him this morning had done much to quench that vague hope—she was so obviously thinking so much more about Gay than of her own little affairs. She was changed, he thought, even in this comparatively short interval; she was so much less of a girl, so much more of a woman. Her present responsibilities as head of the little household at Villa Caterina had given her, as it were, a new assurance and poise that intensified that rare charm of hers. She looked serenely happy and contented, but as if her new life had brought her peace rather than ecstatic joy.

"She'll stay on here, I suppose?" he said.

"I suppose so. She's got nowhere really to go."

"You won't mind?"

"Oh, no, I shall be glad. I'm fond of her, you see."

"But it'll be more difficult now, perhaps? I feel as if we were thrusting too much upon you."

"I can't expect to have things quite smooth, when everything is so perfect," she said, with a glance at that delicately-colored scene before her.

"Wise child!" said Michael, his eyes full of the old ironical laughter. "But the externals here must make up for a good deal, I'm bound to admit." He let his glance rest for a moment upon the wide, pale Bay, now beginning to be colored like a delicate turquoise, the dipping headlands, the lovely outlines and hues of the mountains.

"Yes, they are wonderful," agreed Anna, simply.

She felt as if, during all these past months she had been living here, patiently, quietly, as in some beautiful dream, waiting for something to happen that should arouse and awaken her. And now she was aware that Michael's coming had achieved this. She had really been waiting for him, and she realized with a stab of pain that when he went away the

place would ever after seem less complete, less perfectly beautiful than it had done in the past. It had always wanted his presence to give it life and meaning. Her heart had been waiting for him, scarcely aware of its own hunger. . . .

She was afraid that when once he had revealed the object of his coming to Gay, he would hurry away from Sant' Elena, and perhaps only think of it in future as a place where he had once had to discharge a highly disagreeable task. He would surely be thankful to leave what had been the scene of something so unpleasant and distasteful. And Anna dreaded that moment when she should find herself once more alone with Gay. While Michael remained there she knew enough of Gay to feel sure that she would be hard and controlled, pretending perhaps not to care, so that Rodney should never have the satisfaction of knowing her hurt. But after Michael had gone, there would be the inevitable break-down, the revelation of all that pent-up bitterness and anger and grief. The future, thus visualized, seemed gray and forbidding. It even seemed to Anna that she might love Gay a little less for thus marring the harmony of her own life.

Gay did not appear at luncheon. She left a little note for Anna:

*I'm taking the boat across to San Gervasio. I know you and Michael will have lots to talk about.*

Anna found the brief missive on her dressing-table when she went up to her room.

Michael had a prolonged swim in the Bay that morning while Anna occupied herself indoors. She was vaguely anxious at Gay's sudden whim to row herself round to San Gervasio. She was quite fearless, and rowed well, but even on calm days there

was always a roughish bit of water where the headlands dipped their bold arms into the sea. Probably Gay would be gone all day, avoiding Michael with a cold determination, as though she half suspected that if she gave him an opportunity he would speak to her about Rodney.

## 5

Gay took the little blue and white boat with its bright blue oars, and rowed away from the wooden landing-stage at the foot of the cliff below the Villa Caterina. She tugged away vigorously, afraid that Anna would see her and try to stop her from going, with some well-meant affectionate assurance that they wanted her company that day.

Gay liked the strenuous exertion of pulling against the tide, the response of her muscles, the feeling of iron strength that was hidden in her body. But the tears streamed unchecked down her face as she thought of Rodney, and then of Michael and Anna.

"They won't miss me," she thought, with bitterness. "They'll be glad really; though Anna'll pretend she wasn't when I go back."

Michael had something to tell her, she was intuitively certain of that. He must, sooner or later, make some allusion to Rodney. And she didn't want to hear anything. If Rodney had something to say let him come to tell her himself. And, in any case, it hurt her to be the spectator of Anna's tranquil happiness. . . . Michael's love for Anna was apparent to her. She had always suspected it, and now it stood clearly revealed, a bright, beautiful thing. . . .

Anna was destined for happiness, for tranquil enjoyment, for the comfort of material things without anxiety for the future. If she married Michael she would be a rich woman. Gay contrasted her

friend's lot with her own. She had nothing, she was penniless, dependent upon her brains and hands for a living. If she wanted anything she had to struggle and fight for it. Nothing came easily to her, nor could she apparently even hold the things she had succeeded in grasping. She thought with bitterness of those miserable flirtations with Rodney and Benny. She had truly, so she believed, cared for Rodney, but that affair with Benny had been utterly idle and futile, an attempt to win a young man merely because he was well off and seemed to like her. Secretly she had been perfectly ready to marry him, and she had been furious with Anna for revealing the fact of her engagement to the countess. These episodes, seen in retrospect, were ugly and in sense degrading. Gay felt that the countess had summed her up pretty accurately, and her energetic action in removing her darling son from the field of danger had shown her precisely what that summing up was. Nothing, perhaps in all her life, had struck so sharply at her pride as Benny's swift defection had done. She had felt herself smudged. She had wanted to show Rodney that she was indifferent to him now; she had tried to marry another man, and her little house of cards had fallen into irreparable ruin. And she had felt it would be easy to please Benny; he would have been satisfied with so little. He would have adored her, because she was so strangely unlike the women of his own race; she was an unknown quantity to him. No, she had not forgiven Anna for her gratuitous interference.

Another boat was approaching her, with a solitary figure dressed in white flannels sitting in it. As it drew nearer she saw that the man was Benny Selvi. His dark hair, which he wore rather long on the top of his head as do so many Italians, flowed back

from his face with a motion almost as of wings as the breeze caught it. His face was healthily sunburnt, and his dark eyes were very bright.

"He doesn't see me," she thought. She paused, lifted one hand, and waved to him. Benny bent his head forward bowing stiffly, and a queer stony expression seemed to transform his face into a mask. So he had seen her, and he had intended perhaps to pass her by. She felt his action like a blow in the face.

So they were back already, the Selvis. Michael would probably hear an exaggerated account of the little episode from Countess Selvi. Perhaps she would even urge him to use his influence and persuade Anna to send her—Gay—away from the Villa Caterina.

Crimson with anger and outraged pride, Gay took up her oars and rowed on toward San Gervasio. That cold formal little bow, such as he might have bestowed upon the merest stranger, showed her that Benny had completely acquiesced in his mother's decision; perhaps he had even been a party to it, glad of the means of escape thus proffered. For when a man cared truly for a woman, he did not allow such things as parental influence or threats of disinheritance to deter him from marriage. No, the fact was that no one had ever really cared for her. They had fallen in love, perhaps, a little at first, charmed by her bright gipsy looks, and afterwards they had drawn away, a little afraid of that very strangeness in her that had at first attracted them. For the second time that morning Gay wept, but this time they were tears of mortification and indignation, and were perhaps the bitterest she had ever shed.

"I shall go away. I can't stay at Sant' Elena now the Selvis have come back," she thought.

But she had nowhere to go until she could find a suitable post. Her old friend Mrs. Phipps-Moxon had gone back to England for the summer and moreover had invited a younger girl to accompany her. She had been rather cool to Gay of late, as if she, too, had been disappointed.

Gay rowed up to the little stone pier at San Gervasio. Leaving the boat there she landed and climbed up to the village with its quaint arcaded streets, in the shadow of which women and girls of all ages sat making the lace for which the place was famous. They were diligent and absorbed in their work. Gay stopped sometimes for a moment to watch them. They looked at her with eyes as dark as her own and invited her to buy some of their handiwork. But Gay shook her head and walked up the steep path to the heights above the town.

## CHAPTER VIII

COUNTESS SELVI

### I

GAY'S absence that day communicated a vague uneasiness to both Michael and Anna. She must have suspected something, they thought, or she would hardly have gone off so early for the whole day, leaving only that abrupt little note.

"But you're not in a hurry to go back, are you, Michael?" said Anna. "I mean—you can stay a little, now you are here?"

"Oh, I can stay all right. I've been owed a holiday for ages. But the question is whether it'll be possible for me to stay, once I've told her."

"Then don't speak just yet," pleaded Anna.

She seemed to want a reprieve for herself as well as for Gay.

"But if I put it off I shall turn coward, too," said Michael.

They were sitting in the loggia, for it was too hot then to be out of doors, and were waiting for tea, when Countess Selvi was announced.

Anna sprang up. She had no idea the countess had returned to Sant' Elena, and the surprise was not altogether a pleasant one. She, too, was afraid that Countess Selvi might say something detrimental about Gay in Michael's hearing, alienating his sympathy.

"I'd no idea you were back. I thought you meant to spend the whole summer at Menaggio."

"No—it doesn't suit me for one thing. I am never happy away from Sant' Elena."

"This is my cousin, Mr. Nugent," said Anna, presenting Michael to the countess. "He has come to stay here for a little."

The countess shook hands with Michael and then sat down and began to fan herself. "Benny is coming to pick me up later," she said. Then turning to Michael: "I hope you like Sant' Elena, Mr. Nugent? We always think Anna's villa is quite one of the most charming. And she has made it look so pretty, too."

"I only came this morning," said Michael, "but so far everything seems to me quite perfect. This is my first glimpse of Italy, which makes it all the more wonderful."

"Oh, I daresay you'll run over quite often, now that Anna's settled here," said the countess. She thought it was no bad thing that her English relations should keep an eye on the girl.

"Well, I'm a very busy man," said Michael, smiling. "I don't often get a holiday."

"Benny saw Miss Lawton rowing toward San Gervasio this morning," said Countess Selvi, after a brief pause. "She was by herself, he said. I wonder you're not afraid of her going off like that alone."

"Oh, Gay's all right, and she's a good swimmer," said Anna, a little taken aback.

The countess turned to Michael and said:

"Dear Anna is so indulgent about Miss Lawton, whom we none of us care for very much."

Michael was slightly astonished. He wondered why it was that Gay contrived to arouse such hostility even in the breasts of mild elderly ladies such as Countess Selvi.

"Well, we shouldn't like to think of Anna's living here quite alone," he said easily.

"Oh, no, of course that wouldn't do at all. In Italy we are still old-fashioned in our views about girls. But I'm not the only one to think Anna hasn't chosen her companion quite wisely."

"But Anna's known her a long time. They're old friends," said Michael.

"Benny agrees with me. He liked Miss Lawton at first, but now he is quite disillusioned; he can hardly bear to hear her name," said the countess, severely.

Michael gave no sign of curiosity, but he wondered nevertheless, exactly what Gay Lawton had done to render herself so thoroughly unacceptable to these friends of Anna's.

Anna poured out tea, thankful for the diversion thus created. She was sorry the subject had been mentioned, and probably when her visitor had departed, Michael would wish to learn more than he could possibly have done from these hints. She would have to answer his questions, and perhaps he would feel less sorry for Gay, less inclined to pity her or to blame Rodney for having so wantonly thrown her over.

Presently a young man came into the loggia and greeted Anna with eager friendliness. Typically Italian as he was, it astonished Michael to hear him address her in such perfect English.

"Anna—it's seemed such ages! We both hated Menaggio!"

Selvi smiled, showing very even white teeth.

Anna felt strongly convinced that he had only come this afternoon because he had seen Gay rowing over to San Gervasio, and trusted to her being away the whole day. She said quietly:

"Benny, this is my cousin, Mr. Nugent—Count Selvi."

The two men shook hands. Though there was

only a year or two of difference in their respective ages, Michael looked far the older of the two. Benny indeed seemed almost like a boy beside him.

"You must bring Mr. Nugent over to lunch one day next week," he told Anna.

"I'm not sure that I shall be here then," said Michael, pleasantly.

"Oh, you've come over for the week-end? That is very English!" said Selvi, with an ironical laugh.

"Well, not quite that. But I'm a busy man, as I've just been telling your mother."

He couldn't help liking Selvi with his gay animation, his almost incredible good looks, the easy grace of his manner. Anna looked almost ethereal by his side, with her delicate pallor, the fairness of her hair. Of course her beauty was bound to attract him, and it was quite obvious that the countess was extremely fond of her, and would offer no opposition to the marriage.

It was indeed the most probable solution of Anna's future, binding her to Sant' Elena and to Italy for the rest of her life. And surely for her that would be the happiest thing.

Michael realized then, with a little stab of dismay, that Selvi was the rival to whom he had somewhat magnanimously and quixotically yielded the first chance of winning Anna's love. As this thought occurred to him, he was conscious of a strange jealousy. He remembered his mother's words, and felt that she must have had some secret knowledge of the state of affairs to prompt her to utter them. Yes, this man would perhaps step in, joyously, conqueringly, where he himself had feared to tread. A thousand scruples had forced silence upon him, but Selvi would never be troubled by one of them. Anna . . . a girl he had known practically all his life, an especial favorite of his mother's, not rich but

by no means dowerless—what more natural than that he should fall in love with her and wish to marry her? It was indeed one of those marriages which from their inherent suitability were almost bound to take place. Nor could Michael be unmindful of the kind and motherly attitude of the countess towards Anna, even though it took the rather unfortunate form of this stern disapproval of Gay. It was almost, he thought, as if some secret understanding already existed between them.

Besides, in this case Anna would be welcome, whereas for him there would be countless difficulties. There had never been any special degree of sympathy between his mother and Anna. If Mrs. Nugent had really cared for the girl, she would hardly have permitted her to leave them with such promptitude, almost as if she had wished to get rid of her. After the first, she had never really tried to prevent her from returning to the Villa Caterina, and in the end she had hastened her departure, actuated by some urgent occult motive that Michael had never been able to fathom. . . .

He had determined, too, that he would not ask Anna to be his wife until he had become a Catholic, and, despite his efforts, he had not been able to devote all the time and attention to this religious problem that he held to be necessary. When he was a Catholic himself, his parents could hardly disapprove of his marrying one; they would understand that this step was the logical and inevitable outcome of the other. His own conversion would in one sense make his path a little easier.

Easier? He hadn't reckoned with Anna, and her absorption in these ancient influences that had now surrounded her with fresh vigor. He felt a renewal of pain when Countess Selvi said:

"It was sweet of your mother to let Anna come

back. I was so afraid she might prevent it. I missed my little daughter."

Michael replied a little stiffly: "Anna was quite free the moment she was eighteen. We could hardly hope to keep her."

Anna had left the loggia with Selvi and had gone into the garden at his request. She had not quite liked to leave Michael and the countess together, fearing that the latter might say prejudicial things against Gay. Still there seemed to be no help for it, and she accompanied him without demur, only saying to Michael as she passed:

"Won't you come out, too, and bring Countess Selvi?"

They rose presently and followed them into the garden, going down the shaded paths under the ilex trees, and then on to the terrace that overlooked the blue and silver of the Bay.

Michael said in a formal tone: "We were so glad to think Anna had found old friends here. I was afraid she might be lonely at first."

"Lonely? But she has that friend she's so devoted to. I am selfish enough to wish Miss Lawton wasn't here."

"Anna is very fond of her."

"Yes, but I don't fancy she finds her a very easy person to live with. I'm going to be frank with you, Mr. Nugent. I don't like Miss Lawton. And I think Anna would be far happier with an older, more tranquil companion."

"Miss Lawton has had an unhappy life," said Michael. He felt constrained to say something in Gay's defense, but even in these few hours at the Villa Caterina he had perceived that the arrangement was not working too smoothly. It was true, perhaps, that Gay had inflicted something of her own unhappiness upon Anna. She had in some sense dimmed the

brightness and serenity of her new life for her. But it could all be traced back to his own brother's treatment of her, and he felt that it would be therefore indecent to fasten the whole blame upon Gay.

"One must try to make up to her for all that she has suffered," continued Michael. "I'm sure Anna feels that too." He knew that there was further suffering ahead for Gay as soon as he could bring himself to reveal the brutal truth to her.

How was he to tell her? How could he protect Anna from Gay's bitterness? Every moment his task seemed to become harder, more impossible. If May had known how complex it all was she would surely never have urged this journey upon him.

"Of course," continued the countess, "when Anna marries, Miss Lawton will have to leave."

"Oh, Anna is so young; I hope she won't think of marrying just yet," he said.

"She is nineteen," said the countess. "In Italy that is not considered at all too young. And Anna is alone, she needs a husband." She fixed her eyes upon the two figures standing at the other end of the terrace.

It was a beautiful evening, very still and windless, and the white sails of the fishing boats were accurately reflected in the water.

Michael was silent. The countess's words had perturbed him. He had the feeling that she had lifted a curtain and shown him an intimate and rather disturbing picture of Anna's new life, which on the surface had appeared so calm and tranquil. This unflattering picture of Gay made him wonder if Anna, despite her love for her, was really happy with her. Gay's was a significant personality, brilliant, but tempestuous. Perhaps she was restive in this beautiful but lonely spot. Perhaps she demanded something more stimulating of life, and felt that her youth

was being wasted here at Villa Caterina. And if Anna was aware of it, she too must suffer at the thought of Gay's discontent.

## 2

Although the countess had not once alluded to that frustrated flirtation between her son and Miss Lawton, Michael was left with the conviction that she had some definite though unrevealed cause for her dislike of Gay. She seemed anxious, too, that the Nugents should use their influence to prevail upon Anna to have another companion in Miss Lawton's place. But this, Michael felt, would at the present moment be not only unjustifiable but impossible. Gay needed all possible kindness and consideration at this critical time. One could not really blame her for anything she might do or be. All the blame must be kept for Rodney, who had suffered least in the little drama and indeed seemed to have escaped scot-free.

When the countess and her son had taken their departure Michael turned to Anna and said:

"Do you think Gay is happy here?"

"No. But then she wouldn't be happy anywhere just now. You mustn't attach too much importance to anything Countess Selvi may have said of her, you know. She doesn't like her, and they've never really got on. It's horrid when one's great friends don't hit it off," she added hurriedly.

"You mustn't let Miss Lawton spoil things," he said.

"I love her far more than I love Countess Selvi," said Anna, with unexpected warmth. She wanted him to know that if she had to choose between the two protagonists, she would inevitably choose Gay.

Michael felt an immense relief at the words. It

really looked as if young Selvi might not have things all his own way, after all. Still, if Anna should fall in love with him—and Michael refused to minimize, even to himself, Benedetto's undoubted attractions—all this devotion to Gay would take a secondary place. Benedetto had everything in his favor—youth, good looks, an adequate income, combined with an immensely desirable propinquity—and personally Michael didn't think that Gay's influence would be strong enough to keep the two young people apart, even if she wished to, which he still had to ascertain. . . .

"I suppose she's really more to you than anybody?" hazarded Michael.

To his astonishment she turned her head abruptly away. "No," she said in a low, strangled tone, so that he could hardly catch the monosyllable. She couldn't meet his eyes then, his bright, questioning, scrutinizing eyes. He was so near, and yet so incredibly far away. . . .

"She means Selvi," thought Michael, jealously.

They stood for some minutes in silence, gazing seaward. When they turned as if aware of some disturbing sound they saw Gay emerging from the trees beyond the terrace. She had just come up the steps from the landing-stage.

Anna went quickly towards her. "Oh, so you've come back, Gay! We've had the most unexpected visitors here to tea—Countess Selvi and Benny. But of course you knew they were back. Benny said he passed you in the boat this morning."

Gay smiled. "I'm so glad Mr. Nugent has lost no time in meeting these dear friends of yours, Anna." Her tone was light, sarcastic, wounding.

"Oh, well, they're such old friends. And I was so surprised to see them. I'd no idea they were back."

Michael came up to the two girls.

"You have quite deserted us," he said kindly to Gay.

"I felt you and Anna would have a lot to say to each other!"

Gay stood there, her arms folded, gazing seawards across the Bay. The immobility of her attitude was very striking, and gave Michael almost the impression of a statue.

Something of constraint fell upon the little group. They had both spoken and thought so much of Gay that it seemed to them as if she must subconsciously be aware of it. Anna felt that Gay's presence, reminding them of the unpleasant task that still had to be performed, was disturbing, even unwelcome. She had been so happy with Michael. . . .

The dusk deepened. Rainbow hues of rose-pink, topaz, and turquoise jeweled the surface of the water. The pansy tones of the mountains deepened in color; the sky behind them was of the clearest amber. A kind of atmospheric magic informed both sea and sky. The boughs of the pine-trees looked almost black against the prevailing pale clear tones.

As they went toward the house, Gay walking a little ahead of them, Anna whispered to Michael:

"Don't tell her yet. . . ."

She knew that Gay was in a hard, bitter, unapproachable mood, alienating sympathy just when she had most need of it. Even in these few hours she was changed. She made it impossible for Michael to approach her, just as if she were silently defying him to speak to her of Rodney. . . .

Michael only said: "My dear child, it's got to be done, and the sooner the better." His voice was hard and decisive.

"Poor Gay," said Anna. She dreaded the moment

when the storm should burst. Something of its violence would inevitably fall upon herself. When Michael saw her pallor, of disquietude, he said to himself: "I won't have Anna worried. I shall get it over to-night."

## 3

There was a bright moon that night, and the Bay looked like a sheet of transparent silver. In the garden there was a heavy fragrance of late-flowering honeysuckle, jessamine, and a summer mimosa. There were few fireflies now, but great horned beetles droned past, and large pale moths showed white against the darkness of shrub and tree.

The murmur of the sea made a sustained rhythmic sound, faint and yet crisp.

"Do come out with me, Miss Lawton. I want to have a talk," said Michael, after dinner.

They had been drinking their coffee in the loggia when he suddenly rose and addressed Gay. She looked up sharply, and, for the moment, Anna thought she was going to refuse point-blank.

Gay was astonished. She had purposely left Anna and Michael alone all day, thinking they would have much that was private to discuss, and she had felt half jealous because she could not be blind to Anna's happiness at seeing her cousin again. Michael's friendship might be a wonderful thing, she told herself; she envied Anna the possession of it.

And all day she had been writhing under the snub she had received that morning from Count Selvi. It had shown her so plainly that not only was everything at an end between them, but that he fully accepted and shared his mother's disapproval.

What could Michael have to say to her? Could it possibly concern Rodney? After a moment's hesi-

tation she rose submissively and went into the garden with him.

It was beautiful to-night, and the moon seemed to imbue everything with a kind of fragile, unreal quality—the ebony shadows, the shining silver spaces, the white flowers gleaming in the dusk, the tall tuberoses with their heavy perfume, the wide Bay stretching like a silken silver cloth to the feet of the mountains. . . .

"What can he want?" she thought, not without a little cold misgiving.

They stood for a few minutes in silence, leaning over the stone balustrade that separated the terrace from the sea. The waves were lapping against the steps beneath them with a soft sucking sound.

"Isn't this quite perfect?" said Michael.

"Yes. But you didn't come out here to tell me that," said Gay, in her queer attractive husky voice.

"No—that's quite true. I came to speak to you about Rodney."

"About Rodney!"

"I simply hate having to tell you," he said. "But someone's got to do it. Rodney . . ." he paused, feeling utterly miserable and helpless.

Gay looked at him with her dark, piercing eyes.

"Is he going to be married?" she asked, in a cool, steady voice.

"Yes."

"Who on earth to?"

"Lady Stella Belton—May's sister-in-law."

"Stella Belton! That child. . . ."

"Yes. She's just nineteen. May—May helped it on, you know. She's very fond of them both."

"May's always pursued me like a malignant fury," said Gay.

"Oh, you mustn't think that. But she's an ambitious woman, and she's devoted to Rodney. I

sometimes think he still counts for more than anyone in her life."

Gay stood there, very still, very silent. Her brown hands were clasped tightly together and rested on the stone ledge of the balustrade. She wasn't going to show Michael that she cared. She was so self-controlled that he could hardly believe she fully realized the whole brutal significance of the truth. He felt sorry for her. She had pluck and grit. There was strength as well as weakness in that strange, complex character.

Suddenly she said:

"Thank you. I'm glad you had the courage to tell me. I think I would rather have heard it from you than from anyone else. And it must have been unspeakably odious. . . ." She smiled at him.

Michael could hardly have remained unaffected by the subtle flattery of her words and look.

"Thank you, too," he said quietly, "for making it easier for me than I'd dared to hope."

"Easier?" The sudden laugh she gave was mirthless and ironical. Couldn't he see that her little world had toppled into ruins? "But I knew long ago, you see. Rodney's letters told me that he didn't care any more. I could read between the lines. But then I thought it would be all right if I could only see him again. . . . What's this girl like?"

"Pretty enough, and very charming. She's got reddish hair."

As Michael stood there it seemed to Gay that his likeness to his brother was very marked. When one saw them together they hardly seemed to resemble each other at all, but apart the strong family-likeness was curiously striking. Gay saw it now, and she felt that Michael, instead of seeming the stranger that he was, was an old and intimate friend. Something of the glamour of Rodney's personality had fallen upon

him. She thought jealously: "He's a much better man than Rodney. One could trust him with one's life. He'll make Anna ever so happy."

"Will it be soon?" she asked, after a long pause.  
"I think—next month."

"That is wise of Stella Belton," she said bitterly.

"I wish I could make some excuse for him," said Michael, almost with a touch of passion. "But though he's my brother and I'm very fond of him, I can't find any extenuating circumstances, except perhaps that he was very young at the time—a mere boy. But apart from that, he ought to have told you long ago that he'd changed. That's where I can't forgive him. Letting the thing drag on for such years, knowing all the time it could only have one ending. . . . And if he hadn't meant to stick to you, what was the use of quarreling with his parents about it?"

"I suppose he thought that he meant to stick to me," said Gay.

"Miss Lawton—I wish I could make amends. I wish I could help you. . . ."

"You can't help me." She gave him a look that was both sad and proud and held in it, too, something of appeal. "I suppose I shall just stay on here with Anna until she marries Benny Selvi. . . ." She looked straight into Michael's dismayed eyes as she spoke.

In her own anguish she had struck the blow blindly although deliberately. Oh, these Nugents! . . . She was writhing beneath the stress of a pain she was too proud to reveal, and the desire to retaliate, to give back blow for blow, was too strong to be resisted.

But it had taken effect. Michael's face in the moonlight was of an almost corpse-like pallor. Little beads of perspiration stood on his brow.

"Marries Selvi?" he repeated,

Although the possibility had been continually in his mind during the few hours of his stay at the Villa Caterina, to hear it put thus into words, as something that was quite definitely going to happen, gave him a quick, sharp stab of pain. He had seen them together that afternoon. He had noticed the friendly, almost intimate terms that existed between Anna and the mother and son. And he had realized, too, that if he had a rival, that rival was Benny.

"Well, wouldn't that be the logical outcome of her coming back to live here?" inquired Gay. "Countess Selvi adores Anna, and these Italians, as you know, arrange marriages for their children."

"Is she—in love with Selvi?" he found himself saying.

"Anna? No—I shouldn't think so. She'd tell you she wasn't anyhow. And I've certainly never asked her. But she likes going there and being fussed over by the countess, with her 'darling little daughter' business." She looked at Michael with a touch of defiant hostility in her eyes, as much as to say: "Don't you imagine that you Nugents are going to have it all your own way!"

"She'd be welcome there," thought Michael, miserably.

Gay must have had opportunities denied to himself of watching the trend of events at Sant' Elena. Perhaps she knew for certain that the young man cared about Anna, and that his mother wished for the marriage.

"He isn't good enough for her," she admitted grudgingly. "But she'll never see that. Women don't."

Perhaps her tacit opposition had caused that rather incomprehensible dislike on the part of Countess Selvi, whose one wish seemed to be that Gay should leave her present post.

Michael had felt a certain relief at first when Gay had turned from the subject of Rodney to discuss other matters, but this conversation had now become even more painful to him.

"He's a good Catholic, of course?" he said.

"Oh, yes, and his mother is very pious. Anna's just the kind of good quiet girl she wants for her son."

There was a far-off touch of contempt in her voice that enraged Michael. Had he forced himself to wait for more than a year before speaking to Anna, only to see her precipitated into a marriage with Selvi? He remembered her ambiguous "No" this evening, when he had asked her if Gay was really more to her than anyone in the world. That exception must have been Selvi, and he felt that he had wrung the confession reluctantly from her.

Suddenly Gay turned to him.

"You can tell Rodney I don't *care*!" she said, in a tone of suppressed passion. "I'm not going to break my heart over anyone so utterly worthless and false! I wish Stella joy of him. I don't *care*!"

Her voice broke on a strangled sob. Her whole form was tense with passion. Her eyes blazed, and her strong brown hands were clenched tightly. It was as if a statue had suddenly come to life with full consciousness of life's pain. The transformation was almost terrible to Michael. He had the feeling that he was looking at the naked soul of Gay Lawton, stripped of all conventionality, reticence and subterfuge. She seemed to have suddenly realized all that Rodney's defection would entail. And she was rebelling with all the hot mutiny of youth against the prospect of a life emptied of his presence.

"I won't stay here! I won't stay with Anna, to be continually reminded of you all. You've all done your best to put a stop to it, haven't you? I don't

suppose May was more to blame than anyone else. I want to go away and forget the name of Nugent!" She flung the words at him in breathless fashion, and her strong slender spare form shook like a reed.

"I'm most frightfully sorry, Miss Lawton," said Michael. "You can't say or think harder things of him, of us, than I've been saying and thinking. I'm awfully sorry, and I wish I could help you."

He put his hand for a second on her hot trembling one. Something of tenderness informed his voice, for it was horrible to his sensitive mind to see her suffering thus, as if under some appalling physical agony that denuded the body of all its pride; the speech, of all its natural reticence. And just for the moment he felt the subtle attraction of Gay, the queer individual charm that once had woven spells for Rodney. He saw that she was beautiful and strange, that she had personality and temperament and a kind of fiery, impetuous quality that prevented her from ever seeming insignificant. If only all had gone well, he felt that she would have been the right wife for his brother. And until now Michael had always been strongly in sympathy with those who had opposed the marriage.

"You mustn't let this drive you away from here," he said. "I know my cousin wants you. She is very fond of you."

Gay was sobbing silently. His unexpected kindness was more than she could bear. He seemed to be speaking to her in Rodney's voice, and yet in tones that one could trust absolutely. Her hand grew still under the firm touch of his.

"Yes—she's fond enough of me now. But when she marries—" Gay paused and gave a hard little laugh. "The Selvis hate me. They feel, I suppose, that I don't consider Benny good enough for Anna!"

Michael withdrew his hand quietly.

"Don't try to influence her one way or the other," he said. "I hope myself that she won't marry just yet. She's very young, you know—in some ways she's almost a child."

Gay stared at him in astonishment.

"Oh, if you *want* her to marry Selvi!" she said impetuously.

"I've never said so. As a matter of fact I should simply hate it. Anna's very English at heart, you know. This Selvi seems a charming boy, but he's not quite the man I should choose for her."

There was really nothing he could adduce to support his intense dislike to the scheme except that he desperately wanted to marry Anna himself. And it would be premature to communicate this fact to Gay Lawton.

"Let's go in," said Gay. "We've been out here such ages. And you must be tired after your journey. Anna'll wonder . . . but perhaps she knows?"

"Yes, she knows. I did ask her to prepare you a little, but she didn't feel able to. Do try to believe that it's hurt us both. You've been so much to Anna."

He followed her down the path gleaming in the moonlight like a pearly track between the twin avenues of darkness. The tuberoses and white phloxes stood up like pale scented ghosts breathing their fragrant incense to the night. There was a freshness as of falling dew that mitigated the warmth of the air. They could see, as they approached, Anna's dim silhouette in the loggia, her head turned seaward.

Gay walked on briskly ahead of him. The violence of her grief had spent itself. She was able to greet Anna calmly when they entered the loggia.

Throwing an arm about her she whispered:

"He's told me everything. He's been most frightfully kind. And I don't want ever to speak of it again!"

She went up to her room without another word.

"How did she take it?" Anna asked gravely.

She had spent that hour in suspense, wondering what they were saying to each other, out there on the moonlit terrace. Always, always, she had been afraid of what Gay might say to Michael when she knew the truth. He was sensitive, behind that cold caustic exterior; he was easily wounded. And she knew Gay's power to wound.

"Better than I expected. You were right in thinking she wasn't unprepared. In some ways she puzzled me."

"Puzzled you?"

"I like her, you know. I used not to. I was against the marriage, and thought Rodney was doing a fool thing getting engaged to a girl he knew so little of. But to-night I could understand why he was for a time—quite a long time—so desperately in love with her." Anna listened in dismayed silence. She was aware that Gay had a curious, almost sinister, power of attracting men. She had seen its swift effect upon Rodney, and more recently upon Benny Selvi. When they freed themselves from her spell, they were apt to turn away with a kind of repulsion proportionate to the initial enchantment. But Michael. . . .

A lamp hung in the loggia and under its searching rays he could see that Anna was looking pale and slightly exhausted.

"I am glad it was not too much of a shock," she said quietly.

"Yes. But she's suffering all the same. I used to hope that her feeling for Rodney was a passing emo-

tion—they knew so little of each other. But I see that it wasn't. . . ."

Michael paced up and down the loggia with a kind of energetic restlessness. All the time he was speaking he was scarcely thinking of Gay and her affairs, but of what she had said to-night concerning Anna and Selvi. She must have had something to go upon, some sure evidence, to speak of the marriage as if it were almost a certainty. He longed to question Anna, but felt the impossibility of this unless he were prepared to disclose his own feeling for her.

Her quiet beauty had this evening a quality that was dazzling and almost unearthly. The gold of her hair, the shining jewel-like gray eyes that looked like stars under the dark level finely-traced brows, the pallor of her skin that still retained the flawless quality of extreme youth—all combined to invest her with a charm that was beyond, as it was always above, Gay's. It was like emerging from some powerful, violent storm and entering upon a quiet, tranquil, sun-filled landscape, to come upon her thus after his tempestuous little interview with Gay.

"Did she say anything to you just now?" he asked.

"Only that you'd told her—that you'd been frightfully kind—and that she didn't wish to speak of it again."

"This has been an awful worry for you, Anna. I'm so sorry."

"Oh, don't think of me. If Gay could only be happy. . . ." She gave him her hand. "Good-night, Michael. . . ."

The touch of her slim cool fingers thrilled him. He watched her as she moved away.

Although he was very tired he felt disinclined to go to bed. He returned to the terrace, and then went down the steps to the little wooden landing-

stage. For a few seconds he stood there, and then the lure of the sea proved too strong for him. He stripped off his clothes, and plunged into the water. He had never bathed by moonlight before, and it seemed to him that he was swimming in a wonderful smooth sea of crystal and silver. The warm flow of the water against his body—the pale and luminous shining of the spray that shook from his arms and hands as they performed their swift and practiced movements—gave him a sensation of physical delight that was unlike anything he had hitherto known. Sometimes he could remember, as a boy, dreaming of such an experience—this floating in a smooth warm sea, so buoyant that it almost supported him without effort on his part. And it had been always, too, a transparent moonlit sea such as this that now enfolded him with its soft and liquid caress. It was all part of this wonderful Italy—this dream-world into which he had suddenly penetrated, and which seemed to belong so utterly to Anna.

He lay on his back, floating idly, his eyes gazing up at that wonderful sky, pale with moonlight, powdered with the gold-dust of millions of stars. . . .

## CHAPTER IX

### BLUE DAYS AT SEA

#### I

GAY appeared on the terrace the following morning just as Anna returned from Mass at the Cathedral. She looked heavy-eyed, as if she had not slept.

"I hope you're not going off for the day again," said Anna, timidly.

"No. I shall stay here. But you needn't be afraid—I shan't interfere with you and your cousin."

"Oh, but I like to have you, and so does Michael. You've quite won over Michael, you know, Gay."

Gay gave her a quick, sharp glance. "Little innocent!" she said.

Nevertheless Anna felt that she was pleased. It would certainly be more pleasant for everyone if Gay and Michael could tolerate each other during his short stay. Gay might so easily have made it impossible for Michael to remain.

But she flushed a little beneath the scrutiny. She felt almost as if Gay had discerned something of her secret. She moved away to the table and began to pour out the coffee from the heavy, old-fashioned Georgian-silver pot.

There was a faint haze over the mountains blurring their outlines. The sun had not yet emerged from that bank of early mist.

"Come and have some coffee, Gay," said Anna.

They saw Michael strolling lazily toward them,

coming from the direction of the house. He greeted the two girls, and then turning to Anna said:

"I had such a heavenly swim by moonlight last night."

"Wasn't it very cold?" asked Gay, helping herself to a crisp-looking roll.

"No, it was exactly right. I don't know when I've enjoyed anything so much."

As they sat there at breakfast, a servant approached bringing a note for Anna. She opened it, glanced at it rapidly, and gave a verbal reply in Italian.

"Countess Selvi has written to say she isn't well, and she wants me to go round and see her this morning. I'm so sorry, Michael. Perhaps you and Gay would like to go out for a row."

Michael swallowed his disappointment. "If Miss Lawton doesn't mind," he said. "But I can really amuse myself quite well."

"Those eternal Selvis!" said Gay, with a touch of scorn. She smiled at Michael as if she had some private understanding with him on the subject. Anna intercepted both look and smile and felt a little indignant. She had been so careful to give no hint to Michael as to the reason of that mutual dislike and distrust which existed between the Selvis and Gay.

All of a sudden she felt afraid of Gay, of her swift, spontaneous, almost unconscious power. Yet, was it so unconscious? One could hardly possess such a strong and vital quality and remain unaware of it.

"Gay can row for miles. She'll show you the coast," said Anna. She wanted to make up to Gay for that little secret disloyal thought of her. And she felt that if Gay were with Michael all through that beautiful summer morning, she would be able to forget something of her own unhappiness. He

had given her his ready, wise sympathy; he seemed eager to help her over this bad bit of the road. But when Anna remembered the episode with Benny and how it had seemed to her, an onlooker, that Gay had been bent on capturing and marrying him, her heart misgave her. What if Gay should deliberately use this power of hers to win Michael? He was the least suspecting of men, and he was very ignorant of women.

"We might take our lunch, unless you want us back soon," said Gay, in an indolent tone.

Anna was momentarily aghast at this sudden enlargement of the programme; it seemed to intensify and deepen her fears. They would be away all day —she would lose a whole day of Michael's visit. She glanced at him, but he did not speak. He was apparently quite ready to acquiesce in any plans that might be made. If he would only plead letters to write, any of the hundred excuses men can always make to escape from a tiresome engagement! But he went on eating his breakfast in happy unconsciousness of what was passing in her mind. He didn't mind then. . . . She felt that Gay was gnawing at the happiness that should have been hers.

Gay was greedy of experience, of emotion. . . . She meant perhaps to conquer Michael. Already she had dispelled his lingering disapproval.

"I wish you could come too, Anna," said Michael, suddenly.

"I could have come this afternoon. I shall only be out an hour or two."

"Don't believe her, Mr. Nugent," struck in Gay. "When she once gets there she always stays for hours. They won't let her go."

Anna was silent. What was Gay trying to make him believe? The conversation seemed to have taken an almost monstrous turn, so distorted was it.

"Anna will be very happy with her darling Selvis," added Gay, in a bantering, ironical tone.

"Well, you mustn't let my being here interfere," said Michael. "And I shall enjoy rowing about this lovely coast."

He leaned back in his chair. The beautiful headland of San Gervasio was almost purple, seen through the haze, and dipped its long arm boldly into the sea. All along the coast little towns were beginning to flash ivory-white in the sunlight. The Bay was becoming a more definite blue.

"I shall have to go over and see what's the matter," said Anna. "I shan't stay long."

She wished she had had the courage to refuse the countess's urgent invitation. The thought of Michael and Gay drifting away together in a boat was unbearable.

## 2

Michael leaned back, smoking a cigarette. The sea rippled about them, blue and silver and very calm. He was watching Gay as she pulled the boat with her steady, strong strokes. Her brown arms were bare; they were slender and muscular, more like a boy's arms than a woman's. It was pleasant to watch her rhythmic movements.

"I'll row presently," he said. It was far more agreeable to sit there idly and watch her, her face a little blurred by the smoke of his cigarette.

She was very pretty to-day, he thought, with her sunbrowned face, her piercing dark eyes rather like a bird's, the slightly *retroussé* nose and slightly turned-down mouth. Her dark hair was uncovered and was very closely and plainly arranged, combed back from her square, emphatic brow, and knotted loosely at the nape of her neck. There was some-

thing almost gipsy-ish about her. And again he thought she was like a wild thing that at some remote period must have been captured and half-forcibly tamed.

"You needn't unless you like," she answered coolly. "I'm used to rowing for hours. I love being on the sea." Her eyes met his squarely. "I hope I wasn't too much of a beast last night."

"You weren't a beast at all," said Michael, quickly. "You bore it beautifully. And it's awfully good of you to be so forgiving to me to-day. I don't deserve it."

"I think—you helped me," said Gay, in a rather emotional tone. "You were most awfully kind."

"Was I? I'm glad of that, for I felt a brute. I was afraid you'd never forgive me for being the bearer of such bad news."

"It wasn't your fault," said Gay, lowering her eyes.

"I'm so glad you realized that. Most people wouldn't have."

"I can see, too, that everything was made too difficult for Rodney. And then when he stopped being so frightfully keen——"

"I wish he'd come here on his way home," said Michael.

"It wouldn't have made any real difference. Your mother never liked me. I felt sometimes as if we were fighting a prolonged duel."

Michael laughed. "Oh, she never fights. She just puts things on one side."

He believed his mother to be too lethargic to be capable of any sustained emotion. Once she had got rid of Gay, she had probably seldom given her another thought. She had just brushed her aside with one of her indolent yet effective gestures.

"It almost made me give up being a Catholic," said Gay, resting her oars and looking at him with flashing eyes. "I haven't practiced my religion for ages."

"I'm sorry for that," said Michael. "I'm sure it must make Anna very unhappy."

"Oh, then you're not prejudiced like the rest?" she asked, surprised.

"Yes. I'm passionately prejudiced in favor of the Catholic Church," he said gravely.

"I prayed and prayed for months about Rodney," said the girl, "I must have wearied heaven with my prayers. I never prayed so hard for anything in all my life. I was abject—almost groveling . . ." She looked at him defiantly.

He felt a little aghast at this confession. It made him fear for her, in her beauty, her recklessness, her rebellion.

"Have you talked about it to Anna? She's such a good Catholic—she might help you."

"No, I don't ever mention it. She knows, of course, because we never go to Mass together, and we used to always. But I'm certain that's why she can't bear the thought of my going away. While I'm here there's hope, you see, of snatching the brand from the burning!"

"But I've always felt that Catholics must receive such enormous consolation from their religion, whatever might happen to them," said Michael, gravely. "Even when they're torn to pieces by grief or hideous physical suffering. I've known cases when they've seemed to me like the most splendid martyrs—glad too that they had something to offer."

His shining, enthusiastic eyes were fixed upon some remote point of the horizon, as if he were hardly thinking of her at all.

"Oh, the good ones may be like that," said Gay.

"Anna, for instance. She'd never say a word if she were tortured. But I'm not like Anna. I've been badly hurt and I know what it's like."

"But you mustn't give up praying," said Michael, with a strange earnestness in his voice. "I quite envy you and Anna having been born, so to speak, in the Faith. It's difficult for a man to change, and then I've never been a very religious person. But to an outsider like myself, it seems to be the one living Church. So don't throw away your gift—your great gift. . . ." He looked at her almost wistfully.

She was suddenly sobered. "It's very difficult to go back. One would feel so ashamed—so humbled. . . ."

"But it's so splendid to think that you *can* go back—that your rebellion hasn't shut you out forever! Perhaps it was only natural that you should rebel at first and take it hardly. But I want you to close that chapter altogether. Don't think of it any more. Start a fresh page—" His voice held a warm, appealing note.

Something in his words calmed her. She was thinking: "He's better than Rodney—Rodney could never have spoken like that." Envy of Anna possessed her like a fiery thing of teeth and claws. She would convert Michael of course. He was a fruit ripe for the plucking. He wasn't, as anyone could see, far from the Kingdom. He could discern already something of its wonder, its golden radiance, its light shining down from the Light of Light. . . . And as she thought of him going forward enthusiastically, she felt for the first time that her own puny rebellion was like a little dark smudge placed wilfully by herself on the shining page of her life.

"I never dreamed you'd look at it like that. I thought you'd be just like the rest of your family," she said.

"Anna was the first to make me think of it," he admitted.

"Anna!"

"Well, I often feel if she hadn't come to us in London, it might quite well have passed me by altogether."

"The Selvis are very pious," said Gay.

"I'm glad of that. I'm glad Anna's got kind Catholic friends here."

His face was a little hard. He didn't want to discuss the Selvis then; the introduction of their name seemed to him to strike a jarring note. They were charming people; he had liked them both, and if he hadn't wanted Anna to be his own wife, he might have welcomed the thought of her marrying this handsome young Italian. . . .

### 3

They had almost reached the great headland of San Gervasio. Beneath its giant perpendicular tufa cliffs, thickly garmented with tall pine trees and low, close-growing scrub that seemed oddly enough to flourish upon that arid soil, the sea was colored gorgeously like a peacock's breast. Calm as it was, the waves in breaking against that rocky inhospitable shore displayed a line of pure white foam, and surged backward so that the boat began to rock in the roughish water. Gay pulled with all her strength against the current. The physical effort was a relief to her in her turbulent mood; she yielded her body to the struggle with almost a sensation of joy. It was pleasant, too, to see the admiring expression in Michael's blue eyes, as he watched her.

"Let me help, won't you?" he said.

"No—no—I can manage quite well." She laughed a little breathlessly.

The muscles of her arms stood out like cords.

"I'm all admiration," he said lazily, smiling at her.

He liked the suggestion she gave of eager, young strength, the practiced skill with which she wielded her oars and managed the boat. And against his will she interested him. He was beginning to understand so clearly why Rodney had fallen in love with her, and why Anna still loved her with such faithful devotion.

He enjoyed, too, the increased motion of the boat as they encountered the rougher water off the headland. Sometimes a shower of spray dampened his hair. It was wonderful—this bright blue world of sea and sky, with that young athletic boyish figure poised so effectively in front of him, the head and shoulders outlined against that vivid blue background. Perhaps, too, the increasing intimacy of their conversation stimulated his dawning interest in Gay. He was glad of the opportunity to learn more of Anna's chosen friend and companion. To live thus with Gay might have its disadvantages for Anna, but at least, he thought, she need never be dull or bored. He could not help admiring Gay that day for her cool courage in facing what was a hopeless situation. Endurance always fortified the fibers of the will, making it a more perfect instrument. . . . He thought now there was something a little noble about Gay Lawton. . . .

"It was horrid for you seeing Anna race off to the Selvis like that," she said, as they reached the calmer water beyond the headland.

Michael smiled. "I should be a fool to mind. Naturally she owes them a great deal." The slight pain he had felt at the episode had vanished in the quite unexpected pleasantness of the present hour. Nor did Gay's words strike him as indiscreet. Probably with her keen discernment she might have

guessed something. And in any case the Selvis were there, and from that ancient inescapable intimacy he felt that he had no right to try to detach Anna. To approach her with a declaration of love so as to obtain such rights would only undo all his patient work of the last year during which he had desired for her only perfect liberty.

"I can't bear Countess Selvi," continued Gay. "And I'm not particularly attached to Benny. You see they hardly trouble to be polite to me now. I'm just Anna's *dame de compagnie* . . . an inferior being. I sometimes think Benny is jealous of me."

"Jealous of you? But why on earth——?"

"Because I'm such an intimate friend of Anna's."

She gave a short laugh. Her own efforts to diminish Anna's loyalty towards these old friends had proved unsuccessful. She had wanted Anna to take her part openly in the matter of that frustrated friendship with Benny. The mother and son had behaved badly to her, and she wondered Anna could want to go on knowing them. But Anna had turned an obstinately deaf ear to these entreaties.

"Has he asked her to marry him?" inquired Michael. He nerved himself for the blow.

"If she has she's never told me. But, then, Anna's often secretive, so one can never be sure. The countess is preparing the way. And your coming may precipitate it."

"My coming? But what's that got to do with it?"

"She may think you're a dangerous rival. She doesn't know anything about your having come here to see me." Her voice dropped. Michael felt vaguely embarrassed at this reference to his mission. For there had always been in his mind that strong secondary motive, undivulged; almost unacknowledged, of wishing to see Anna once more.

"She may think it was merely to see Anna," Gay added. . . .

"It's true I did want to see her," said Michael, smiling.

Then there was silence. Gay rowed, if possible, a little more vigorously than before. She had learned something, though not a great deal. Michael was different from the rest of his family; he was far more human. If he loved Anna, no amount of opposition would deter him from marrying her. *He* wouldn't listen to all this talk about Catholics and a mixed marriage. But he would probably make every effort to become a Catholic himself. He was already on the high road; his grave face was set steadily toward Rome. Yes, he would leap over every barrier that divided him from the woman he so devotedly loved.

But if Anna married Selvi? She might perhaps rush blindly into that marriage, unconscious of Michael's love. Of course he ought to speak—he ought to tell her. It was foolish to run such an appalling risk, and she wondered what his motive for silence could possibly be.

But seeing Selvi there as a possible rival—seeing too how matters stood—he would surely speak to Anna before he left Italy.

Gay sighed involuntarily. She thought that if Anna married Michael she would be the most perfectly happy woman in the world.

"We might land and have lunch," she said suddenly.

They were drifting in with the tide to the beach below a tiny fishing hamlet built on a narrow strip of flat ground between the sea and the mountains that rose almost perpendicularly behind it. Not far off an ancient gray tower seemed to watch protectively over the little hamlet. On the hill above, a church

with a white spire stood upon an elevated plateau. A mule-path led up to it, winding through the gray olive orchards.

On each side of the little bay, great headlands were thrust out boldly into the sea, so that the water there was calm, and ran blue to the very shore.

Gay pulled the boat up to some rocks, fastened it securely, and then leapt out, refusing Michael's proffered assistance.

"This is San Giuliano," she said; "it's one of my favorite haunts. I was here only yesterday. The people know me quite well. I bring them things sometimes when they're ill."

There was a little *osteria* close to the shore where they bought some sharp white wine to drink with their sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs. They ate their simple meal on the strip of gray beach, and afterwards went back to the primitive little inn to drink some *caffè espresso*. Despite Anna's absence, Michael enjoyed the picnic. He was in no hurry to return, but sat there smoking cigarettes with Gay in a shady spot near the sea. The view of the Bay was enclosed in a narrow frame formed by the great pine-trees that grew aslant upon the cliffs on either side. Their spreading boughs silhouetted against the sky were of a vivid lustrous green. Such a picture, Michael thought, Stevenson might have had in his mind when he wrote:

I will make a palace fit for you and me  
Of green days in forests and blue days at sea. . . .

Anna found Countess Selvi lying upon a *chaise-longue* in the loggia of her villa, which overlooked the sea from the heights above the little town.

She held out a slim hand in welcome.

"My dear child, how good of you to come! I

hope I'm not very cruel to tear you away from the handsome cousin?"

"Oh, no—he's gone out with Gay in the boat."

"But they were disappointed, perhaps, that you didn't accompany them?"

Anna shook her head. "I'm sure they didn't mind."

She wished, indeed, that they had appeared to mind a little more—to share in her own disappointment which had seemed to her almost like a minor tragedy. To lose this whole beautiful blue day of Michael's company!

Gay, in that fresh white knitted dress, short-sleeved and low-necked, that hung so loosely about her square boyish figure, had looked almost beautiful. Her face had borne no trace of last night's tears.

"Gay is very unhappy," said Anna. "Her engagement to Rodney Nugent is broken off. He didn't behave well to her. It had been going on for a long time, but his parents didn't approve. Then when he came back from India he fell in love with someone else. That is why Michael came here—to tell her—"

"Oh!" said Countess Selvi, a little astonished. This revelation imparted a new light to the sudden and apparently unexpected arrival of Michael Nugent. Perhaps she herself had jumped too hastily at what seemed to her an obvious conclusion.

She held the Italian view, that as soon as a girl grew up a suitable marriage should be arranged for her. No compulsion was used, for if the girl was disinclined to marry, no steps of the kind were taken. The countess, however, held the usual opinion that unless a girl had a definite vocation for the religious life, she preferred to marry and have a home of her own. There was less independence in Italy than in England, where, however, missalliances were of far

more frequent occurrence. Anna's complete, and as it seemed to her unnatural, independence, which was apparently smiled upon by the elder Nugents, had always struck the countess as deplorable. . . . She felt a strong desire to rescue her from a situation so detrimental to matrimony.

She was fond of the girl, and Benedetto, after his brief tempestuous flirtation with Gay, had returned to that condition of respectful admiration of Anna which the countess so desired should develop into a permanent love. He had always liked Anna, regarding her in the old days almost as a little sister, and he had often thought that perhaps some day they would be engaged to be married. The brief affair with Gay had resulted in a complete and rapid disillusionment the moment he had heard she was engaged to another man, a fact which she had discreetly hidden from him.

The countess, as has been seen, did not approve of Gay; she even considered her a dangerous young woman, and felt that in time her influence might destroy something that was beautifully fresh and unspoilt in Anna. It was whispered too, that Miss Lawton had grown careless about her religion, and indeed she was seldom seen now with Anna in the beautiful old fifteenth century Cathedral.

"Perhaps she will transfer her affections to the brother now," said the countess, lightly.

It was a shot at a venture, but it struck Anna sharply. She reddened a little and did not speak. She thought of those two, out together upon that wonderful blue sea, speaking intimately of Gay's affairs; Michael comforting her, perhaps, as he knew so well how to do. Since their interview last night out on the moonlit terrace, their mutual attitude had undergone a subtle transformation. And Anna knew that, left alone with him, Gay would, consciously or

unconsciously, use all her power to charm him, to weave spells about him, just as she had done in the past with Rodney and Benny. . . .

"He is quite charming—the handsome cousin," said the countess.

"Yes," agreed Anna, absently.

"But I didn't ask you to come here in order to talk about him," said Countess Selvi, pleasantly. "I wanted to have a little intimate chat with you, Anna darling. I wanted to talk to you about your own dear self. . . ."

Anna looked at her enquiringly. She was very far from suspecting the truth, and was quite unaware that all this time the countess had been adroitly "feeling her way."

"About yourself and Benedetto!"

"Benedetto!"

"My dear, we are both very anxious you should overlook that little foolishness with Miss Lawton. I know you will never believe me if I were to tell you of the way she led him on, just as if she had made up her mind to marry him. Any young man would have had his head just temporarily turned, and Benedetto is in some ways very young and unsuspecting."

"But I have never blamed either of them! Why should you wish me to overlook it?" said Anna, still mystified.

"Oh, my dear child, it's because Benny wishes to marry you! He has loved you all the time, but he is so afraid you may not be able to forgive him. He knows that his conduct must have seemed inexcusable. . . ."

Anna seemed to withdraw into herself. Her body as well as her straight-cut little features insensibly stiffened. She had never believed in Gay's ironical allusions to Selvi's devotion. She did not reply, and

her whole form acquired a rigidity that was unusual to her.

"I've sometimes feared that Miss Lawton would use her influence to prevent your marrying Benny. Especially now—when she feels she has a grudge against us. But I don't want you to let yourself be influenced by her, Anna dear. I want you to examine your own heart, and find out if you wish for this marriage. I need not say that it would make me as well as Benny very happy."

Anna felt stupefied. Life, which had seemed to her for the most part such a simple thing, had suddenly become most cruelly complicated. Michael—Gay—Benedetto—herself—they had all become actors in a little drama. Until yesterday she had believed that one of these days she would be Michael's wife. His greeting of her had been so full of an eager affection that she could hardly believe he did not in some sort reciprocate her love. But to-day she could foresee nothing of what this sudden new intimacy with Gay might bring. She knew Gay's power, so lightly, so even carelessly wielded, so deadly in its effect. She had seen Rodney—and yes, even Benedetto—succumb to it. For one whole summer Benedetto had certainly been at Gay's feet. Then something had occurred to effect his disillusionment. Anna never knew quite what Gay had said or done, nor what part the countess had played, nor even whether it was simply the fact of her being secretly engaged to someone else that had opened Benny's usually astute eyes. Gay's adorers were by no means noted for their fidelity. Perhaps she was aware of this, and it had given her that queer little touch of bitterness.

But if she ever conquered Michael? . . . There was a fundamental fidelity and constancy about Michael that Anna recognized with aching heart. . . .

"But I'm not thinking of marriage," she managed at last to say in a voice that was not quite steady despite her efforts to control it. "It isn't that I don't like Benny—we've been friends such a long time. But I'm happy here, in my life with Gay. I don't want to change it."

"But you can't go on living at Villa Caterina with Miss Lawton forever. She is certain to marry, and then what will you do?"

Certain to marry? . . . Anna flinched.

"Perhaps the idea is too novel . . . you need time to think it over—to ask your director, and pray for guidance." The countess lowered her voice. She was aware that no director would urge a girl to marry a man, however eligible, if she did not feel she cared sufficiently for him. "Don't keep Benny waiting too long," she added, with a smile.

"Oh, but you must tell him at once! I shouldn't like to keep him waiting at all. I'm quite sure that I don't care for him like that. Only as a dear, dear friend. . . ."

"But my dear, you can't decide such an important matter off-hand like that without consulting anyone, or at least taking the advice of your English guardians. I am sure they would be delighted to hear of it—a young man a little older than yourself, with a comfortable fortune. Then he is a good Catholic, and you would settle down permanently in our beloved Italy!"

The countess stretched out her hand with its beautiful rings and laid it upon Anna's.

"My guardians have no authority over me, now," said Anna, withdrawing her hand.

"It would do no harm to consult them. You might even ask this nice cousin!"

Ask Michael! . . . The thought filled her with a chill of dismay.

"But in any case you mustn't listen to Miss Lawton!"

"I'm sure you're wrong in thinking Gay would interfere!"

A week ago—two days ago—Gay would surely have laughed such a suggestion to scorn. But now Anna could tell her nothing. In the light of this new conviction she discerned with subtle penetration Gay's attitude towards Michael. A cold darkness seemed to invade her whole being, chilling her very heart. She saw that her own marriage with Benedetto would serve to leave Gay perfectly free to pursue her present plan to its ultimate bourne.

"I daresay she'd be glad if I married," said Anna. The words were wrung from her. They were merely acquiescent, quite free from bitterness.

"Glad?"

"It would leave her so free!"

"Free? When I was just thinking how free *you* would be if she'd only take it into her head to go away!"

Anna perceived that her own point of view had shifted. Yes, it was Gay who must wish for perfect freedom, to build her own wrecked life anew, perhaps with the aid of Michael. She saw desolately how immensely her own marriage with Benedetto would react upon Gay. It would leave her so free to weave those spells, that subtle enchantment, about Michael. . . .

But at this thought Anna was conscious of a fierce rebellion within her soul, bringing about an incredible change of attitude towards Gay Lawton. She seemed to see her endowed with a personality, a temperament, that were quite sinister. She saw Gay deliberately setting about to detach Michael from his old allegiance. But alas, Michael would be false to no former love. Anna had so long been in his eyes only

a child. "The little girl—the dear little cousin. . . ." There was a sting in this sudden recollection of Mrs. Nugent's lethargic but pregnant pronouncements.

For years Anna had dreamed that Michael would become a Catholic and for years she had prayed for this intention. It had seemed to her almost terrible that this being, so dear to her, should be outside the wonderful consolations, the spiritual gifts, of the Faith which were hers. For always she had visualized the Catholic Church as a golden light spreading over sea and land, even to the uttermost parts of the earth, and everything and everyone that remained outside it seemed to her to be enveloped in a gray mist. She pitied those wanderers in the outer mist and darkness, some very far from the Faith, others still more greatly deluded, believing that they possessed it. She could not bear to think of Michael there. Gay could never help him to approach that light. And now that he was here at Sant' Elena, Anna seemed to be fighting a duel with Gay for the possession of Michael's soul. . . .

It wasn't only her love for him, she told herself, though that too played its part, for human and divine things were so closely, so inextricably interwoven. It was something more than love, greater than love, as all those must know who have ever prayed for the conversion of a soul.

She felt she could give Michael what Gay in her restless, worldly ambition could never give him.

And yet she owed—they all owed—reparation to Gay. . . .

"Think it over," said Countess Selvi, "and I shall tell Benny that you can't give him an answer just yet. He must wait. *Pazienza!*" She smiled at Anna. Then struck by a sudden thought she added: "You

are such a child I need hardly ask you! But there is no one else, is there?"

Anna gave her a strange, almost terrified look. The countess had suddenly assumed an important rôle in the little drama. And Anna had the feeling that she would even force her to act against her will. She wasn't to be allowed to remain a supine spectator, watching the slow, difficult, painful unraveling of the little tangle. And then in the midst of it all she suddenly found herself wondering what Gay and Michael were doing at that moment. What they were saying to each other. Gay perhaps a little flushed and excited—she always looked beautiful in her own strange way when she was excited—she was almost fiery then, a thing of flame, eager, alive. . . .

"No . . . there is no one . . ." stammered Anna. She rose and held out her hand. "I must go, I've so many things to see to. I hope you'll soon be better." The hurried, stammered phrases seemed to possess no meaning at all. She looked at the countess as if she had been a stranger, yet a stranger who had a remote power over her. It frightened her, just as the thought of Benny so oddly frightened her now.

She walked back down the steep path through the olive orchards till she reached the broad white high road that led into the town of Sant' Elena with its arcaded streets, its groups of busy lace-makers chattering over their work. Looking back, she could see the Selvis' villa peeping out from its lofty nest of verdure. But she could not possibly bring herself to regard it as her future home. Countess Selvi, with her devotion to her son, her acquiescence in Italian customs, would be little likely to smile approval upon a separate establishment for her son and his wife. To live always with the countess and Benny—the prospect filled Anna with a quite definite alarm. She turned away

abruptly from the contemplation of that huge square palatial abode with its flat red roof, its torrents of bougainvillea and honeysuckle.

Anna was tired when she reached the Villa Caterina. She felt unaccountably depressed, almost as if she were going to be forced into this marriage against her will. It was ridiculous of course, she told herself; such a thing as that couldn't possibly happen.

Presently she took her writing materials into the loggia and began to answer some letters. It was nearly luncheon-time, but many hours must still elapse before Gay and Michael would return from their expedition. They would go to some distant spot. Gay rowing tirelessly and prolonging the holiday as much as possible. Michael would be simply acquiescent.

"Perhaps they would marry, if I were out of the way," thought Anna.

The thought tormented her. But she couldn't fight. There was something derogatory about that. If Michael wanted to marry Gay, she wouldn't lift a finger to prevent it.

She wondered again what they were saying to each other, over there in some quiet hidden sea-washed spot behind the giant purple arm of San Gervasio.

## CHAPTER X

### A CONVERSION

#### I

WHEN at last after interminable hours Anna heard their voices as she sat on the terrace, the moon was already high in the heavens, and the tuberoses, stocks, and jessamine in the garden were filling the air with their heavy fragrance. Mingled with the scent there was a salt freshness from the sea. Bats whirred past in their swift, nervous, purposeless flight. Low in the southwest sky the star Spica shone with an unusual brilliance.

Anna went to the top of the steps and looked down into the cool dark shadows of the water, faintly touched to argent in the moonlight.

"Is that you, Michael?"

And it was Gay's voice that answered cheerily in husky, excited tones:

"Yes, here we are! I'm afraid we're awfully late, but you must forgive us. We've had a simply topping day."

She ran lightly up to the terrace and kissed Anna with an almost patronizing affection. Michael followed more slowly. As he neared the top of the steps he said: "I hope you didn't think anything had happened to us, Anna? We took a long walk at San Giuliano and lost our way."

"Well, we're here now, safe and sound," said Gay, "and I'm sure Anna never gave us a thought! You

forget she's been with the Selvis all day, haven't you, Anna?"

They walked toward the house. Anna answered slowly:

"No, I didn't stay all day. I came back to lunch. The countess wasn't well."

In ordinary circumstances Anna would probably have found an early opportunity of telling Gay the substance of that interview, and they would have laughed over it together, and agreed that such a marriage was impossible. She would have been braced, too, by Gay's satirical opposition to the scheme. But now she felt that she could never tell her about it. She knew by instinct that no such opposition would be forthcoming. She felt that Gay would only shrug her shoulders and say: "It's what we've all been waiting for, Anna!"

No, it was better to keep the affair a secret, at any rate as long as Michael remained at the Villa Caterina. She hoped earnestly that Gay would not discover anything about the interview. But she had a way of finding out things when her curiosity was at all stimulated, and Countess Selvi was not a silent woman. Aware of Gay's influence over Anna, the countess might even make an attempt to enlist her sympathy and support. But Anna rejected that idea as unlikely. It was impossible to conceive of such a *rapprochement* between the two women.

Above all, Anna didn't want the matter to reach Michael's ears. She was so afraid that he might advise her to marry Benedetto. Then she would know for certain that he didn't love her—that she was still only a child to him—the dear little cousin to whom he had always been kind in an elder-brotherly fashion.

She noticed that when the two returned from that protracted picnic they were "Gay" and "Michael"

to each other. In those few hours their friendship had become an established fact.

That night at dinner Gay seemed to Anna quite changed. There was something hard and bright and unapproachable about her. Her self-assurance was emphasized. She seemed to relegate Anna to a secondary place. She talked and laughed with Michael, and Anna wondered if he noticed that she herself was almost left out of the conversation. But no—men didn't notice these things. And he seemed to enjoy talking to Gay, and discussing their mutual adventures, in which Anna had had no share.

It was true that they did not leave her again for a whole day, but often when Gay suggested that they should walk to a distant church in some mountain village, she advised Anna to remain at home, and said it would be too far for her. Anna was not capable of walking such immense distances as Gay, whose walking powers were almost equal to those of a man, and she readily consented to remain at home. But always there was a little chill of disappointment because she was losing if only a few hours of Michael's stay.

A kind of constraint arose between her and Michael during those first days of his visit, and she blamed herself for it, thinking that she must have done or said something to displease him. She was too generous to attribute all the blame to Gay.

Michael moved between the two women unconscious that anything untoward was happening. He was very simple in his acceptance of ordinary events, and read no ulterior significance into them. It was Gay who pointed out to him one day that Anna seemed changed.

"Changed? In what way?" he said abruptly.

"I put it down to the fact that Benny wants to marry her, and she's beginning to fall in love. It's

time he asked her to marry him if he means to. Or perhaps the countess will make the *démarches* to you, as you're such a near relation—they often arrange marriages like that here. Wouldn't it be simply priceless?"

As she uttered the light sentences she watched him with a swift, close scrutiny; she wanted to see the effect upon him of this suggestion—that any change in Anna could not concern himself at all, but was wholly connected with Selvi.

"I sincerely hope she will do nothing of the kind!" said Michael, almost violently. "Why should Anna marry her son?"

Yet, remembering his little talk with the countess in the garden, he felt perfectly certain that this was in her mind. He only hoped that Anna wouldn't be weak.

But when he came to consider the matter he felt that there really was an appreciable change in Anna. She was inclined to efface herself. She was elusive, as she had never been in London. She never seemed at all eager to accompany them in their walks, their expeditions on the sea. She was thoughtful and pensive, even a little sad. Miss Lawton's determined gayety seemed to quench her.

## 2

When Sunday came Anna tapped at Gay's door. She had risen early as usual to go to Mass, and she kept on hoping that Gay would relent and accompany her.

"I'm ready. Are you coming, Gay?" she called softly.

Gay half opened the door and looked out.

"No. Michael and I have arranged to bathe."

Anna went downstairs, and into the garden. It was a very still calm summer morning. Land and sea and sky all seemed half transparent in that magic crystal clearness.

Suddenly coming from the terrace she saw Michael advancing toward her. He was dressed in a gray flannel suit, and carried his straw hat in his hand.

"Are you going to Mass?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Mayn't I come with you, Anna?"

"Oh, yes," she said, "but I thought you were going to bathe this morning."

"So I am. But I want to go to Mass first. I've been waiting for you."

As they left the garden and began to walk down the broad white road that led to Sant' Elena, he said shyly:

"I hardly ever seem to see you now. And I thought when I came we should be together all day."

Anna was silent. She scarcely knew what to say. But her smile was reassuring. She was relieved to think that Michael had wanted her, had perhaps missed her.

On each side of the road high walls rose, built of rough stone that seemed to blossom spontaneously. Clumps of valerian made a decorative pink mist fringing the top of them, and through the interstices yellow toadflax and sprigs of honeysuckle pushed their way valiantly.

"Even your walls seem to flower here," said Michael.

Anna walked sedately by his side. Her black hat almost hid her face from him; he could see only the perfect outline of her lips and chin. He wondered how it had happened that he had let so many days go by scarcely seeing her, accepting her self-effacement without a single struggle to overcome it.

It was the fault of this other girl who always wanted him to do something or go somewhere, who wished to show him the view from some distant point or climb an almost inaccessible mule-path through forests of chestnut and cypress. She captured him in the toils of her own abundant energy, which always held a kind of joy that was not unattractive to him. Anna, cool, slow and pensive, never held out a hand to succor him. It was as if seeing their enjoyment of this perfect summer weather, she had purposely thrown them together. Perhaps, too, she had felt it would take Gay's thoughts from her own sorrow to be with Michael. And if this were the case her plan had certainly succeeded, for Gay showed no sign of grief and seemed only to have abandoned herself to the pleasure of the hour. Her brave endurance of that sorrow had won his sympathy, and besides she was a capital companion, tireless, always good-humored, capable, resourceful.

Then too, he had never come to the Villa Caterina ostensibly to see Anna. He had felt it was too soon as yet to end that hateful self-imposed time of probation.

Perhaps he was a fool, he told himself. Why should he look calmly on and watch Benny step in and secure the prize he so coveted? Why shouldn't he at least show her that she could choose between them? . . .

Now finding himself alone with Anna in the cool sweet freshness of that summer morning, flower-scented, and brackish with the light breeze from the sea, it seemed to him that he had been false, too, to his own obscure purpose. He had let himself be swung heedlessly along by Gay's energy. There was tenacity about her, too. She had the qualities that Anna lacked. Anna would receive graciously and gratefully the gifts life offered to her, but she would

never seek them in that eager, restless, importunate fashion. . . .

They passed along the narrow arcaded streets, where the shop-windows were all hidden behind their stout wooden shutters. There were not many people about, and most of these were wending their way toward the Cathedral—a great Romanesque building that stood in a piazza of its own. Its dome and campanile rose loftily above the huddled roofs of the houses, and were silhouetted clearly against the pale blue of the sky. Below it in the wide piazza the daily fruit and vegetable market was in progress, and the masses of figs, apricots, and peaches mingling with the scarlet hues of the tomatoes and *peperoni* made wonderful blots of color amid the delicate green verdure. To Michael's English eyes, the quantity and quality and cheapness of the fruit seemed almost incredible.

They entered the Cathedral, and he followed Anna up the aisle. It was quiet and cool and gray there at that early hour, and amid that coolness and grayness the lights upon the altar shone out with a vivid illumination.

A priest came in and went up to the altar. The Holy Sacrifice had begun. Michael knelt down by Anna's side. It seemed to him then, that the little barrier of ice that had arisen between them was utterly broken down. They were here together. He took a book from his pocket and followed the Mass with a deep earnestness.

It was when he saw Anna rise and go to the altar rail that a sharp pain seemed to stab his very heart. He remembered the day when he had first seen her receive Holy Communion at Farm Street. He watched her, and as he did so two figures passed him. They were Countess Selvi and her son. Michael turned away and hid his face in his hands.

He felt the separation then with all his being. It seemed to him final and ultimate, the separation of soul from soul. She was so near and yet so infinitely removed. He realized for the first time that all his surface sympathy with the Catholic religion counted for nothing at all. He was outside, he was separated, and through his own fault, since he had made no practical formal profession of faith. And yet he had the Faith. He had been satisfied with outward things—with going to Mass and Benediction. But the sacraments were for him still behind closed doors; he could not approach them. And for the first time he wondered why he had been so complacently satisfied with so small a participation. He realized, as all converts must do at one time or another, the years of loss and emptiness which might have been so abundantly filled. He could have wept now over those wasted years when he might have seen yet did not see, when he might have heard and did not hear. . . .

It came to him with a sense of shock, as if he had been very roughly and abruptly awakened from a profound slumber. There is always something almost physical in the violent first onslaught of grace in the human heart, sweet, irresistible and yet completely dominating. Eyes and ears are unsealed and constrained to see and hear. Michael felt as if strength had gone out of him. He longed to turn and flee. It was as if veils had been torn down. . . . He had forgotten Anna. She had no part in this struggle, this strange spiritual adventure that had overtaken him. But he knew that the period of waiting and weighing and judging and deciding was over. He must go forward. The lights upon the altar seemed to be beckoning to him. They were filled with a mystical radiance. He felt shaken and cowed, yet supremely happy. He thought of the

man who had been struck down on the road to Damascus, and had arisen blind yet seeing, humbled to the dust yet ready from that moment to endure perils and bodily suffering and ignominy for the sake of that One who had called to him in words of such appealing sweetness upon the way.

When Anna came back to her seat, Michael was no longer there. He had retired to a shadowy corner of the church where he could pray alone. Even Anna's beloved presence would have seemed an interruption then.

He wondered then if those born to the Faith ever knew that curiously intimate appeal which is vouchsafed to the convert, so suddenly, so inexplicably, that to each one the actual moment of conviction and yielding seems always in some sense a mystery that can never be described or put into words. . . .

Michael walked back alone to the Villa Caterina. He was unwilling, just then, to see or speak to anyone. His thoughts were full of the strange and mystical hour through which he had just passed, and which seemed to him entirely remote from his usual daily life.

"After all, we've been simply *deprived* of our spiritual rights in England," he thought.

Brought up as he had been in the normal, Protestant, slightly free-thinking atmosphere, such as is to be found in most families belonging to neither extreme of the established Church, he had yet always felt that the Reformation had been one of those incredible and wicked blunders that have somehow shaken the course of history as few wise and prudent and just measures have ever done. His historical sense had always been outraged by it, and in its effect upon religion he could see nothing but disaster. One Fold and One Shepherd—and then an evil

German monk of no particular intellectual capacity simply stepped in and effected the disruption of that ideal which had flourished in the West for over fifteen hundred years. Incredible, too, that the new teaching—for the most part the frank and deadly negation of the old—should have swept like a fiery blast of destruction over almost the whole of Northern Europe. And even now to return to the Faith, the one true Fold, a man had always to face the disapproval, contempt, and often also the hostility of his fellow-men. But in the various High Church movements, becoming more frequent and pronounced in the Church of England, Michael could discern a sick striving for that lost inheritance and for those ancient rights, a gesture, althought an impotent one, toward the old Faith, an effort to regain what had been forfeited, doomed in its very essence to failure, since that return must be accomplished independently by each individual soul. The Fold couldn't exist without the Shepherd, living, visible, guided by the Holy Spirit—the Sovereign Pontiff, to whom allegiance and submission were due. Many he knew pinned their hopes to some far-off corporate action, but even if millions knocked at the Door the submission must still be individual. *And there were added that day about three thousand souls.* . . .

Living, growing, progressing, after nearly two thousand years, the Catholic Church held her divine credentials in her hands for all men to see. And each day the responsibility of those who saw and could still refuse to accept became a more grave, a more deadly thing. . . .

"I mustn't wait," he thought, "I must ask Anna what I'd better do." A kind of fierce exultation informed him. He was looking at life with new eyes. And he wanted passionately that all the world should share the joy that was his.

When he reached the gate of the Villa Caterina, Michael turned back again and walked toward the little town. He wanted to meet Anna—he longed with boyish eagerness to tell her. Yet when at last he saw her in the distance he felt almost embarrassed.

When Anna saw him coming back toward her, her face lit up with pleasure. The constraint between them had surely vanished forever. It had all been an evil dream—this fear of Gay. And to Gay he could only have been one of many, never the one dear and beloved thing in the world.

"I liked coming—I wish I could tell you how much," said Michael, as he came up to her.

His bright enthusiastic eyes were shining with a curious light. She thought—and then put the thought from her as fantastic—that he looked like a man who had seen a vision. She was quick to recognize the change, and she longed to know the reason of it.

"What happened?" she said. "Do tell me, Michael!"

Her face as she raised it to his was all soft with a kind of wondering sympathy.

"Well, it's been rather overwhelming," said Michael. "You see, when I was there this morning I felt I couldn't wait any more. . . ."

"Wait?" She was puzzled.

"I mean I want to become a Catholic as soon as I can. As soon as they'll have me."

"Oh, Michael," she said, and there were tears in her eyes, "I was so praying for you."

During Mass did not all pray for their particular intentions, believing, too, that these prayers would be offered to Almighty God with the sublime Sacrifice of the altar?

"There's an English priest staying at Sant' Elena now. Perhaps you would like to talk to him?"

"Yes," he assented eagerly.

"He would prepare you—and if you could stay here long enough he could receive you."

"You'd let me stay?"

"But of course. As long as you like—as long as you can."

"I haven't had a holiday for such ages," said Michael, "that I'm sure my father won't mind if I stay on a bit."

London and the London office seemed especially distasteful to him just then on this morning of crystal clearness, of magic silver lights, and transparent blue shadows.

"We mustn't lose any time," he continued; "I shall want to see this English priest as soon as possible."

"Oh, I think you could see him to-day, Michael," said Anna, earnestly.

She went up to her room and took off her hat, her thoughts full of this abrupt decision of Michael's. But the final act of conversion was often sudden and abrupt. "*I went and I washed and I see.*" So simple and yet so significant. . . . She had known few converts in her life, but they had all told her the same thing. The same story of striving and struggling and almost despair, and then suddenly an end to it all, just as if one had been stunned into peace. And at the last there was an irresistible impulse not to be denied, sweet and violent and full of a kind of gentle fierceness impossible to withstand.

Michael walked out to the breakfast table, set as usual upon the terrace. Because the sun was so powerful now at such an early hour an orange-colored awning had been arranged there, set upon high poles, under the trees.

Gay was already sitting at the table. She looked up as he approached.

"You didn't come for a swim, Michael. The water was so warm—it was delicious."

Her face was still glowing from her plunge into that warm, buoyant water.

"No, I met Anna, and went to Mass with her," he said.

"That was very diplomatic of you," said Gay, in her satirical voice.

"Oh, no, it wasn't. I wanted to go—I liked to go." Her words had jarred upon him.

"I'm sure Anna was delighted."

"Well, you see I nearly always went with her in London. It was like old times."

"Was Benny there?"

"Yes—with his mother."

"He often goes early—just to see Anna." She laughed. "It's a charming romance—they're such a pretty couple."

She spoke as if the affair were in sure process of accomplishment. But Michael would not permit himself to believe it.

"You must come back for the wedding, Michael, and give the bride away!"

He laughed good-humoredly. It was impossible to take offense, or to show how greatly he disliked the idea.

"All right—I'll come!"

To-day he didn't feel afraid of Benny. Anna had seemed so close to him, so dear, on that homeward walk. Even Gay's teasing, ironical words couldn't really hurt him.

Anna appeared. "Oh, why didn't you begin?"

"We were waiting for our hostess," said Gay, demurely.

Anna took up the coffee pot and Gay noticed that

her hand trembled a little. Something had happened to disturb her. Something had been said perhaps on that walk to and from Mass. . . .

Gay turned to Michael and began to talk to him. She was so full of spirits and energy it seemed impossible that she could only just have sustained and emerged from one of the most humiliating experiences that can befall a woman. At first in the hour of open defeat she had shown bitterness and violence of emotion. But now she could turn this bright glowing face, these challenging glances and provocative smiles to Michael, as if nothing untoward had happened.

She was looking very pretty this morning in a dress of softest shell-pink. Always since Michael's coming she had taken particular care to dress daintily and well, she who was ordinarily careless, and of late had been even slovenly about her personal appearance. Her beauty and charm that morning were incontestable, and she seemed to be aware of it, and aware, too, of her own power. She was using all her ample past experience to enchain Michael. Was he conscious of it? Was he just lending himself acquiescently to the game, knowing that it was only a game, and that his partner—or opponent, who could say which?—was a beautiful and charming woman whose evident desire was to please him? Always when she saw them together, Michael's attitude towards Gay struck Anna as enigmatical and ambiguous, even this morning when his mind must surely be so full of other things. . . .

He seemed to be attracted by her, almost against his will.

And again Anna made a strong resolution not to be dragged into the little drama. She preferred to be a cool, unembarrassed spectator whose heart might be wrung by what she saw, but who would

never lift a finger to arrest the progress of events. She couldn't fight. . . . There was something derogatory in the thought. Her cool, fastidious sense of dignity, an innate pride that was as dainty as physical cleanliness, prohibited any kind of competition. If Michael loved her, he would surely tell her so, and make her the happiest woman in the world.

In the matter of religion he would be with her, heart and soul.

"I mean to bathe again from the boat this morning. Italo is going to take me out," said Gay, lighting a cigarette. "Will you come, Michael?"

He hesitated a moment and then said: "Yes, I'll come. Won't you, Anna?"

"There wouldn't be room in the boat for three of us and Italo," said Anna, smiling, "so I'll come another day."

Yet the refusal cost her something. She pictured the little scene—Italo taking the boat out far into the Bay, then the plunge into that cool crystal sea, the shouted greetings, the tossed silver spray. She was a practiced swimmer, far more practiced and accomplished than Gay, who was, however, the more intrepid and venturesome of the two girls.

Later from the loggia she could see the blue-painted boat rocking idly in the Bay, and two half-visible dark bubbles moving upon the crystal and sapphire surface.

## 4

Anna was lying in bed. As she lay there, slightly propped up on the pillows, she could see the Bay like a great, clear mirror melting into a pale, colorless sky. San Gervasio thrust a gray arm into the sea. It was not yet five o'clock, and she had a whole

hour to wait before getting up. But she liked to watch the progress of the dawn, touching this wonderful world of sea and sky with its cold pure fingers, bringing out a detail here, revealing something unexpected there, emphasizing suddenly some familiar landmark, awakening the earth gradually, kindly, almost reluctantly. . . .

As yet there was little or no color in the scene. All was faintly washed in tones of pearl and silver and frailest shell-pink, while the shadows were fashioned of softest gray velvet.

Anna liked it best then in its cool, virginal, early morning beauty, when the mountain air was pouring down in fresh currents from the heights, and the sun had not yet risen to paint everything in fiery tones of blue and gold.

Far out to sea, a sail white as snow emerged from the mists. A steamer bound for Genoa sent a blur of smoke that smudged the pallor of the sky, as if someone had drawn a gray plume across it. A man rowed out from the port in a brightly-painted boat. Anna could see the flash of his green oars, making an emphatic note of color. She heard him shout to a comrade on the quay. Then all was silence again, except for the almost stealthy lisp of the sea as it washed against the rocks and steps beneath her window.

Now a streak of sharp white light cut across the sea like a path. There was a faint tinge of turquoise in the sky, and in the east appeared a broad glow of pink that spread slowly over sky and sea. The mountains turned from gray to violet. She could hear the birds twittering sleepily in the ilex-trees. The salt freshness of the sea flowed into her room on the wings of a faint, caressing wind. It seemed to purify everything with its cold, cleansing touch. She lifted her face, bending forward a little

so that she might feel the flow of it. It was delicious to lie like this and watch the slow transformation of the world, as if some invisible artist hand were coloring it generously and yet so delicately. . . .

Michael had been a whole week at Sant' Elena. Every morning after his swim he went down to the little town and sought out the English priest who was staying in one of the hotels. He was ill and could not leave his room. Already, after a few days, he and Michael were fast friends.

"I'm a dying man," he said to Michael just as he was about to go away after their first interview, "but I thank Almighty God because He has sent one more soul to me before I go."

Michael was deeply touched. The frail figure lying on the couch was emaciated beyond belief; the strange visionary blue eyes gazed forth from the hollowest of sockets. He had the sweetest smile, Michael thought, that he had ever seen.

There was nothing to be done. The man was under sentence of death, and he was perfectly happy. Death was the reward he looked forward to after a long lifetime spent in the pursuit and capture of souls. But he had seldom known any young man who interested him as much as Michael Nugent. He was so convinced, so humble, so ready and eager to obey.

"I'm afraid I'm a most awful fraud," said Michael, smiling, "I shan't forfeit anything by becoming a Catholic. It doesn't seem fair that it should be all gain. Even the confessional has ceased to be a stumbling-block!"

"Perhaps you'll be called upon to pay, later," said Father Denham, with a smile. "I'm sure, though, that you'll pay generously."

"I shall try to," said Michael.

His father had offered no objection to his remaining for a few weeks longer at Sant' Elena. He did not know what was pending, but in any case, Michael feared no opposition from that quarter. Athelstan Nugent was the most tolerant of men. His mother would put the matter on one side as something disagreeable, about which it was best not to think at all. May had become very High Church since her marriage with Chingford, and would probably murmur sarcastic remarks about the Italian Mission, and the degeneration of character that was always noticeable in converts. . . . He felt he wouldn't mind those pin-pricks at all. But he thought it hateful that the unfaithfulness of some remote ancestor should have forced the step upon him. He had been cheated of all his rights, of his spiritual inheritance. When he looked at the little Italian children going up to the altar rail to receive their Divine Lord when they were still so small that they had to stand instead of kneel, he envied them, and thought with sadness of the millions of English children who had been robbed of their spiritual heritage.

And yet the struggle was worth while. Perhaps his faith would always mean more to him because he had earned it with sorrow as well as with joy; because it had not come too easily, but had meant a prolonged spiritual struggle. It was like winning name and fame by sheer hard work and effort, instead of inheriting one's wealth and place in the world.

His leisure was spent more with Gay than with Anna. Yet it was Anna who had his confidence; he did not tell Gay what was occupying him during the long hours of the morning. But it was Gay who captured him, who bore him off to bathe and boat, to climb and sight-see. He often accompanied her out of sheer good-nature, feeling still that he couldn't do enough for her. But always the best moment of

all was when he drew near to the Villa Caterina and knew that Anna would be waiting for him on the terrace, a cool tranquil figure. . . .

He wasn't nearly so much afraid of the future now. He felt quite certain that it would hold Anna. Perhaps the day was not so very far distant when he would speak to her. But he had a strong inward conviction that this other matter must be accomplished first. Nothing must be allowed to divert his thoughts from that. Since the call had come to him so definitely, so emphatically, at Sant' Elena, he felt that at Sant' Elena it must also be answered.

When she looked out at the dawn spreading its silver radiance over land and sea and sky, Anna was thinking of Michael. He was emerging like the mists.

"He'll be almost too perfect," she thought.

## 5

## DARLING MICHAEL:

You can't really mean it. I do hope it is not too late for me to write and urge you not to take this suicidal step. You know what one always feels about converts—that they are weak and easily swayed. I never felt there was any fear of your being influenced in this way, and that's why I always let you take Anna to church. I wasn't even really very much frightened when I found a whole lot of *Roman* books in your room just before it was re-papered. May is unspeakably shocked. You know what old Lord Wendle feels about these things—he is so very High Church—he goes *all lengths*, I am told, except that he doesn't believe in the Pope. I never thought that any of *my* children would believe in the Pope. And you were never at all pious even when you were little, Michael; I often had quite a business to get you to say your prayers. So I felt you were not in the least likely to

be attracted. I do advise you to give up the idea. I'm sure you will hate all the restrictions. I am told it interferes with *everything*.

Your loving Mother,  
JULIET NUGENT

DEAR MICHAEL:

This is a matter for you to decide, and I'm sure if you've made up your mind about it, nothing can stop you. You were always a little bit like poor old Temple, so I'm not really surprised you should travel along the same road, and I hope you'll find all the happiness in it that he did. I suppose everyone who thinks about these things at all looks Romeward at least once in his or her life. I hardly ever take up a modern autobiography that doesn't explain why the author did or did not become a Catholic. I thought of it myself years ago, when dear old Temple went over. But I hadn't time to learn about it. I expect that is the way with a good many of us. . . .

The Wendles have been opening their mouths pretty wide about the settlements, and I suppose I shall have to give in, though I haven't done so yet. Rodney seems set on his Stella, and your mother won't hear of any opposition. Well, no more. God bless you.

Your loving,  
DAD

Michael had been prepared for his mother's letter, but not for his father's. There was something wistful about Athelstan's sympathy, as if he envied his son for doing what he had never had the time or courage to do himself. Michael read the letter several times. The question of Rodney's settlements seemed to be worrying him a bit. But surely he was never going to give in to the point of hurting himself? This thought alarmed Michael, and made him wish for the first time to be back in London, assisting his father in the matter. It was all very

well for his mother to urge him to acquiesce, but she knew nothing of his financial affairs. If she asked for money he always gave it to her generously without making a fuss. Michael didn't know much about the internal affairs of the firm as yet; he had been a partner too short a time to grasp them fully. But he did know that the preceding year had been a bad one, and that since Patton's death things had never seemed quite so flourishing. There had been one or two big failures in the city, and financial matters in these modern days were so delicately organized, so finely adjusted, that the failure of one was bound to react upon many others. It had been so with Nugent and Co.

Athelstan was always cheerily optimistic, and this was the first time he had ever sounded even a vague note of alarm. It struck Michael as significant, and he resolved to go home immediately after his reception into the Church.

This ceremony took place about a month later, very early one morning in the Cathedral. Afterward he and Anna knelt side by side to receive Holy Communion. It was a strange, mystical hour for them both.

Gay knew nothing of what was impending. Michael wished for no other confidants except Anna and Father Denham.

As they walked home afterward, he turned to Anna.

"Isn't it strange how different one feels? . . ."

A new birth, . . . and beyond, a new heaven and a new earth. . . . Even if he never again savored that first mystical rapture, he knew that always life would seem a little different, that always he would go softly because of the things that had happened to him that day. . . .

## CHAPTER XI

### ARRANGING A MARRIAGE

#### I

MICHAEL was still at the Villa Caterina. His father had written urging him to take a longer holiday as he was enjoying himself so much in Italy.

July was nearing its end, and a spell of intense heat had set in. The walks and climbs with Gay had been discontinued, and the three spent long hours bathing in the sea. Harmony had been completely restored. Because Anna had been so close to Michael when he had made his abjuration, she felt that she could afford to let Gay enjoy his company on less serious occasions.

Often they motored in the evening to some town that was not too far distant, seeing the long undulating line of that beautiful coast, the views over mountain and bay.

Michael and Gay were sitting in the loggia late one afternoon when Countess Selvi was announced.

"Oh, isn't Anna here?" she said, in a disappointed tone.

"She'll be back quite soon," said Gay, coolly.

They had hardly seen the Selvis of late, and Anna had purposely avoided going there. She hoped that Benny would accept this as a tacit refusal, and say no more to her about marriage.

"I hear you are going back to England shortly, Mr. Nugent?" said the countess.

"Well, I'm thinking of going next week," said Michael.

They sat there for a few minutes in silence, while the countess fanned herself vigorously with a little paper fan.

"I have been so wanting to have a talk with you, Mr. Nugent," she said at last. "I feel that you represent dear Anna's guardians. And the child is still too young to make important decisions without advice."

"Oh, but if Anna wants my advice, I'm sure she'll ask me for it," said Michael, leaning back in his chair and looking at her with bright amused eyes. He did not dare look at Gay for he felt that her prophecy was actually coming true.

Gay was determined not to go away. She enjoyed the feeling that her presence was making it difficult for the countess to speak. She turned her head and looked seaward, and hoped that Anna would not return too soon.

"I don't know whether Anna has told you that my son is most anxious to marry her," continued the countess, fanning herself with increased energy. "In Italy, as perhaps you know, the actual proposals are not left, as with you, to the young people themselves. It's more prudent for that part to be undertaken by the parents or guardians—it saves trouble."

Michael's face was grave and stern now and wholly non-committal. He, too, began to wish that Gay would go away. But she sat there, her eyes shining, her face flushed.

"I'm sure Miss Lawton must have seen how things were going," said the countess, perceiving with some irritation that Michael was determined to give her no help. He ought to have been *glad* to think that his little cousin had the opportunity of making such a good marriage! . . .

"But of course I've seen," said Gay. "And I think it would be the best thing in the world for Anna. In fact I've been longing for it."

While the countess had no belief at all in Gay's sincerity, she was grateful for the help thus proffered from so unexpected a quarter.

"Well, I'm sure if you say so, Miss Lawton—for you are the one who would lose most by dear Anna's marriage—"

"I should never think of myself when it is a question of Anna's happiness," said Gay, in a low husky tone.

Michael glanced at her in astonishment. She actually seemed in favor of this preposterous idea. He said sternly:

"And you think this would be for her happiness?"

Gay returned his look quite squarely.

"I'm positive that it would. You see they've known each other since they were children. They're of the same religion—almost of the same age."

"And you think that Anna cares for my son, don't you?" said the countess.

"I'm quite sure she does."

"You ought to know, Miss Lawton. Such an intimate friend. . . . We were always afraid that you might disapprove and perhaps try to prevent it."

"You misjudge me utterly," said Gay. Her tone was lofty and not free from rebuke.

Michael listened as one in a bad dream. Of course he could go—he would go—straight to Anna, as soon as she came in, and entreat her to be his wife. She was his—only his. They were making a hideous, gigantic mistake. . . .

"I felt that Mr. Nugent would be able to tell me if there was likely to be any opposition from Anna's guardians." Countess Selvi turned to Michael. He had not said so in so many words, but

she had a strong inward conviction that the scheme did not meet with his approval.

"I am sure my parents would wish me to say that in this matter Anna is perfectly free."

Michael's voice did not seem to belong to him; it was so stern and composed. He looked at these two women in dismay. They were Anna's most intimate friends, and could he therefore presume that they were wholly unaware of what was necessary for her happiness?

"I've been a fool," he thought; "I ought to have put a stop to all this ages ago." The thought of Anna's marrying Benny was absurd.

"I could at least ascertain her feelings on the subject," he added.

"Oh, she'd hardly be likely to tell you. She's very reserved," said Gay. "But I think I could do it for you, if you liked."

"I'm so glad to think that you are in favor of it, Miss Lawton," said the countess, wondering why she had always so misjudged and mistrusted Gay.

"Of course I am. And when Mr. Nugent thinks it over he'll come to the same conclusion," said Gay.

She smiled at Michael, pretending not to notice his dismayed, astonished silence.

They were like two weavers of destiny, he thought, busily tying knots. . . . Why couldn't they leave Anna alone? What business was it of theirs? All the time he felt as if they were hypnotizing him into acquiescence, trying to make him believe also, that Anna cared for Benny. Gay, too—he hadn't anticipated this emphatic support from Gay. It made him feel as if she must possess some secret knowledge of Anna's own feelings on the subject.

"Anna must not be persuaded into anything against her will," he said.

"But this isn't against her will," said Gay, with

a frank, disarming smile, "I've every reason to believe that she's extremely attached to Count Selvi. I've had so many opportunities of watching them together."

"Does Anna know anything of this?" inquired Michael, turning almost fiercely to the countess.

He was beginning to feel that they were hiding something from him. He did not blame the countess; she was so obviously playing for her son's happiness. But deep down in his heart, a slow hot anger against Gay was simmering.

"Oh, yes, I spoke to her myself some weeks ago."

"What did she say?"

"She said very properly that she wasn't thinking of marriage. I am sure it was a great surprise to her. I begged her not to give a decided answer at once, but to wait and examine her own heart. Anna has been much occupied with your visit, I know—perhaps she has had time to think it over."

"She didn't refuse to consider it?" he asked, immensely puzzled and perturbed.

"I wouldn't let her. I begged her to pray—to ask her director—a priest would be sure to see the advantages of such a marriage for her from a spiritual point of view. I asked her if there was anyone else, but she assured me that there wasn't."

Gay struck in lightly: "Of course there isn't. Anna knows no one."

Yes, it was Gay's attitude that puzzled him. He had often heard her speak of the Selvis with ridicule, and now she was suddenly displaying an apparent eagerness for the marriage.

"You mustn't try to persuade Anna to marry your son unless she cares for him," said Michael, sternly. "She is only nineteen—the experiment would be highly dangerous."

"Not with Anna," said Gay. "Though she's so

young, she knows her own mind. And then as Countess Selvi says, her director——”

“I don’t believe any priest would urge a girl to marry against her will!” he said warmly.

“Of course he wouldn’t—that would be a terrible thing to do,” said the countess. “But what I’m trying to show you, Mr. Nugent, is that this wouldn’t be against Anna’s will. She has always liked my son. She’s devoted to us both. Only sometimes a girl hesitates—there’s so much at stake—and then a little wise and prudent advice is very helpful.”

“I shall never be able to fight this,” thought Michael, dolefully.

He began to see how unnecessary and quixotic his own decision to “leave Anna alone” for a year or two had been. That first year of complete independence in the world was bound to be a very crucial one in the life of so young and untried a girl. He saw how insanely he had relied upon their old intimacy and friendship, how secure he had felt in his very insecurity.

They couldn’t guess—and he was glad of it—that he was as capable of safeguarding Anna’s faith as any other Catholic man. He would have been just as scrupulous even if he hadn’t become a Catholic, knowing as he did how intimately her religion was bound up in all her actions, the important part it played in her life, and how she was subjected to its daily and constant influence. It gave her that stability which made her character so formed, despite her youth. A man who won such a woman would know that she was his forever, even beyond the paltry separation of death.

“You must leave her to me, dear Countess Selvi,” said Gay, “and I think I can promise you that it’ll be quite all right. I’m as deeply concerned for dear Anna’s happiness as you are. But there was bound

to be a little doubt and hesitation at first, because Anna is Anna. She doesn't snatch at things impulsively as I do—she likes to take them up and examine them and meditate upon them."

She spoke as if with calm knowledge of Anna's hidden nature. And yet, if Gay Lawton didn't know the truth about her, who did? Gay was apparently absolutely assured on the subject; she loved Anna, and she wanted to see her happily married—to Benedetto Selvi. . . .

On the face of it, too, she was the one who had most to lose by such an event. Benny, less than most husbands, would be likely to tolerate the presence in his house of an unsympathetic female friend to whom, too, he had once committed the unspeakable folly of making love.

Now that he knew Gay better, he disliked her very much, partly because of the easy conquest she had made of him, and partly because her careless, indifferent attitude towards religion dismayed him. He wanted, as his mother knew, to rescue Anna from Gay, to separate them utterly, because he feared her influence.

"And I'm sure, Mr. Nugent, that you, too, will do your part in helping dear Anna to come to a wise conclusion," said Countess Selvi, suavely.

"I shall not interfere!" exclaimed Michael, almost with violence. "I refuse to advise her one way or the other. If she wishes to marry your son, she is perfectly free to do so!"

His violet eyes flashed. Something of his iron self-control had left him. Watching him with an interested curiosity Gay thought: "He doesn't like the idea—I wonder why!"

Anna came into the loggia. She was wearing a simple gray muslin dress, and in this garment she looked very slender and young and girlish. A wide gray straw hat hid her hair and shadowed her face. She was pale on account of the heat, but her face wore a calm, contented expression. How unconscious she looked, and unmindful, Michael thought, of love and its feverish restlessness. The smile she gave him was full of an almost child-like confidence. She went up to Countess Selvi and kissed her.

"We haven't seen you for ages! How are you? And how's Benny?"

"Benny is away—he has gone to Genoa for a few days. On business," added the countess.

Michael and Gay withdrew, leaving the countess and Anna alone. They both felt she would wish to talk to her privately upon this important matter. They went out into the garden together, and as they were strolling down the ilex-walk Michael said suddenly:

"We mustn't let her persuade Anna into marrying Selvi."

Gay glanced at him in surprise. She wondered a little why he should have such a strong objection to the proposed marriage. He had seen Benedetto and had apparently liked him.

"Oh, you mustn't think she'd ever do that. Countess Selvi is far too good and conscientious. But she's seen, I expect, as I have, Anna's strong regard and affection for her son."

Her tone of calm conviction—so assured, that it was almost careless—pierced Michael to the heart.

"And surely there's be no opposition from your parents? A man who's quite well off—and one she's

known all her life! Your mother is *anti* most things, but I should think even she would welcome such a comfortable solution of Anna's problem."

"But there's no problem!" he exclaimed, warmly, "and my parents have no control over Anna now. She is perfectly happy here. Why should she marry? She ought to wait a year—several years—and then choose prudently and wisely."

"But if she chooses Benny that will be very wise and prudent," said Gay.

His face wore its inscrutable look as of an iron mask.

"But she doesn't care—I'm certain of it! Why should that garrulous old woman try to persuade her that she does?" Even as he uttered the words he was conscious of being in a sense unjust to Countess Selvi. "Do leave Anna alone, Gay!"

"Oh, I'm not going to interfere! You needn't be afraid. . . ." She was a little piqued at his authoritative tone that held, too, something of reprobation.

Was he going to make this business of Anna's his own? She thought there was something ambiguous now in Michael's attitude—something that seemed singularly at variance with his whole demeanor since his arrival at the Villa Caterina. He might almost have been a little in love with Anna himself! She had often wondered about that until his arrival, but when he came she could see only that kindly elder-brotherly pose beneath which Anna had sometimes shown a certain restiveness. Anna was more difficult to read. She had let Gay take Michael off whithersoever she would, almost from the first day. She had raised no difficulties, made no protests. She had almost thrown them into each other's company. That argued at least a certain indifference.

But supposing all the time Michael had been secretly in love with Anna? Would he not perhaps be all the more likely to turn to her—Gay—for sympathy in the hour of defeat? Gay dwelt on this thought; it pleased and flattered her. She thought him adorable in this mood, it was so seldom one saw him stirred. He wasn't like Rodney in this respect. One could always read Rodney like a book.

"But it isn't as if you wished to marry her yourself!" she said, in a bright, challenging tone.

Michael did not answer, and his blue eyes as they rested upon her for a second held something of hostility.

"Your mother would certainly be *anti* that. You've seen, perhaps, how she regards the idea of a mixed marriage. Anna isn't diplomatic about her religion either—she wouldn't be likely to hide it under a bushel to please anyone! She'd set it on the house-top for all the world to see."

"No one would expect Anna to hide her faith—it's an integral part of her." He seemed to seize eagerly upon this side-issue, as if thankful to escape from Gay's ironical, insistent questioning.

It would have been the moment, he felt, to turn her attention completely from Anna by announcing his own change of faith.

"Then for goodness' sake don't oppose such an excellent chance of getting her settled where she'll never have to hide it!" said Gay. "These Italians, when they are devout, are more Catholic than the Pope himself. Why, I've seen them crossing themselves when they leave the house or get into a cab! That is the atmosphere Anna wants. Not one where these things are barely tolerated."

"She could have all that without marrying Selvi," said Michael, in a cold, withdrawn tone.

But she was right in the main, he could acknowl-

edge that with a desolate inward sadness. So right, that he felt himself almost persuaded by her deadly logic. To separate Anna from her Italian life would be almost an act of cruelty, he thought.

"Out here," said Gay, "there's no need for Anna to adapt herself to circumstances, and if she marries Benny there's no reason why she ever should. She'd never be *hors de son assiette* as she'd be in England. If you look at it from this point of view, you'll see how well suited she and Selvi are to each other."

"There are plenty of Catholics in England, if it comes to that," he said warmly. "Why, I'm one myself——!" He stopped abruptly. It was the nearest he intended to go to the truth.

Perhaps she would be quick enough to grasp what he implicitly inferred, and it intrigued him to watch the effect of his little disclosure upon her. Gay was really for a second taken aback. She opened her mouth with a little gasp of astonishment. Her face wore a blank stunned look, almost as if she had received an unexpected blow. Michael, a Catholic? They had had this secret, then, unknown to herself, between them. . . .

She recovered herself quickly. "Ah, then you understand from personal experience what the Faith means to Anna!"

"I can't think why she should be so very anxious for the marriage, unless she knows Anna's keen about it, too," was his uncomfortable reflection. But perhaps she did know. He believed that girls often made confidences to each other about their love-affairs. Probably it was in this way Gay had learnt that Anna cared for Benny. . . .

"Of course she may be right, and if so I'm too late," he thought despondently. "I feel somehow that between them they'll persuade Anna."

"Do let's go out in the boat," said Gay suddenly,

"it is such a perfect evening, and Countess Selvi is sure to stay with Anna for ages."

Michael agreed listlessly. It would help to kill the time until the countess left Anna free to listen to all that he had to tell her. But perhaps it was too late—perhaps she wouldn't want to hear it now. . . .

## 3

Countess Selvi took Anna's hand and looked at her with a wise, subtle smile. She was glad to have this interview with her quite alone. The tacit opposition of that London cousin had disturbed her vaguely, but then on the other hand she had been agreeably surprised at Gay's unexpected support. Help would therefore be undoubtedly forthcoming from Miss Lawton, although Mr. Nugent had absolutely refused to interfere. But then men, she reflected, were as a rule quite destitute of match-making instincts. And this man obviously held those strange English ideas about the arranging of marriages, together with a horror of anything that seemed at all like coercion. He didn't seem to recognize the undoubted rights of parents and guardians to step in and help, with their superior wisdom and prudence and experience, to shape a girl's destiny. And how was a totally inexperienced girl of nineteen to judge what would best promote her own happiness? She had been quick to see, however, that Michael's opposition had scarcely had anything to do with the personality of her son. He didn't take that into consideration at all, but he objected to the whole thing on principle as a subtle infringement of personal rights.

"Darling child, I've been having a little talk with your cousin about you!"

The countess's voice was suave and gentle and affectionate, yet her words struck chill to Anna's heart. She withdrew her hand abruptly, and made a little shrinking movement.

"About me?" she said, with a feeling of terror she could not subdue. "Why—what can you have to say to Michael about me?"

During the last few weeks she had seen practically nothing of the countess and her son, and their continued silence and absence had lulled her into a kind of security, and made her believe that either they had accepted her first decision as final, or that they were waiting for her to make the next move.

In her excitement about Michael's conversion and the great happiness which this event had brought to her, she had scarcely bestowed a thought upon these other friends. And her love for Michael preoccupied her to such an extent that everyone else seemed a little unreal and shadowy, as if they hardly existed.

Now a cold fear possessed her that somehow these people would contrive to separate her from Michael.

"He's the only one of your relations that it's possible for me to consult," said Countess Selvi. "And I felt I should like to know how the idea of your marrying my son would be received by your guardians." Her tone was kind but quite firm, as if she took a great deal for granted.

"My marriage has nothing whatever to do with them," said Anna, in a choked, indignant voice. She was both angry and horrified to find that the subject had been discussed with Michael. Why couldn't they leave her alone? Why was the countess—who had always seemed to be her friend—so intent upon bringing about this marriage? Had she been trying to persuade Michael that already an understanding existed between herself and Benny?

"My dear, these cousins have been your kind guardians for many years—it's only right they should be consulted."

Anna was silent. She wondered how Michael had received the suggestion, what he had said, how he had looked. Whether he had believed this monstrous, incredible thing. . . .

"I was glad," continued the countess, "to find that Miss Lawton was so warmly in favor of the marriage. Considering how much she has to lose by it, I could not help thinking her conduct most disinterested! She seemed quite eager—quite anxious, and took such an extraordinarily unselfish view of it, as if she was convinced that it would be for your happiness."

The maze had thickened about her. Anna felt as if she were one of the actors in a particularly evil dream. Surely she would soon awake . . . and find herself free from the cruel little tangle.

"Perhaps they've persuaded Michael that I wish for it," she thought, dismayed. "It's because of him that Gay wants it to happen."

It was hideous to harbor these disloyal and mistrustful thoughts of Gay, but what other motive could she have?

She felt it was impossible to tell the countess clearly and decisively that she didn't care for Benny except as a dear friend. Countess Selvi adored her son, and the information must be conveyed quietly and tactfully, preferably too by letter.

"I do wish you hadn't spoken of it to Michael," she managed to say at last. "It was quite unnecessary to—to consult him at all."

"I don't think he was really averse to the idea," said the countess, who was determined to take a hopeful view of Michael's attitude. "He was only opposed to any persuasion . . . he wished you of

course to be quite free. But then he isn't accustomed to our system of arranging marriages."

"He wasn't against it?" she asked pitifully. A desolation that was like a great cold sea of pain possessed her. Not against it? Not averse to it? She clenched her hands to endure the anguish.

"I find him charming," said the countess, evading the question. "So frank—so straightforward—so truly John-Bullish in his convictions."

Charming? . . . Anna could not have said if Michael were charming or not. She only knew that she loved him, and that her dream of being beloved by him in return was destined never to be fulfilled. He had said no word against the marriage. He had only wished her to be free—perfectly free.

"Now I've every hope, my dear child, that when you come to think it over you'll make us all very happy indeed. Talk it over with Mr. Nugent and Miss Lawton." She laid her hand on Anna's, but the girl drew it sharply away.

"No—no—I shall never change," she said. "I like Benny as a friend. You and he are the two oldest friends I have in the world. But I can't marry him."

The countess smiled, a little superior, unconvinced smile. When it came to the point, many girls drew back in alarm from what seemed like a surrender of liberty. The time had gone by when a woman through matrimony alone could attain to a measure of liberty. The freedom that girls enjoyed in these days was, in the countess's opinion, disastrous.

"You are very young, Anna, and you mustn't be allowed to make a mistake that would affect your whole life. But as I say, don't do anything in a hurry. Consult Mr. Nugent and Miss Lawton, who both have your welfare so much at heart."

Anna stood there, staring seawards with tears

in her eyes. This reiteration of Gay's name produced a profoundly sinister impression upon her.

"No—no—it's no good My mind's made up. . . ."

The countess rose to take her departure. There was something both haughty and reproachful in her manner, as she bade Anna good-bye. She made her feel rather like an obstinately naughty and impenitent child.

But at least she had struck a blow in her own defense—they shouldn't have it all their own way. . . .

#### 4

Anna went up to her room. She felt an urgent need of solitude. Even her final effort to convince the countess that she would never consent to the marriage had failed to remove from her own mind the disagreeable effect bequeathed by that scene in the loggia—the almost sinister impression of suggestion, of coercion, of the slow, difficult, but ultimately sure pressure that one mind can exercise upon another.

Her brain was in a whirl. Thoughts she could not banish or control invaded it. Michael knew of this hateful proposal. The countess had made a bold bid for his support, and apparently his sole concern had been that she, Anna, should be left perfectly free to decide what was necessary for her happiness. Free—the word had no meaning, since freedom could never bring Michael a step nearer to her. A sob broke from her. Worse than all was this dreadful disruption of her own dream cherished, as she now knew, ever since that wild and beautiful spring evening a few days before her departure from London when Michael had come up to the schoolroom to talk to her. Its faint reflex illumination had gilded

for her even these calm and tranquil months at Sant' Elena.

Yes, up till the very eve of his actual arrival, she had always felt that she was waiting for Michael, preparing for his coming. It had often helped her to endure and surmount the little wounds and pin-pricks imparted by Gay's moody and frequently sullen companionship. These things had not really touched her at all; she had felt too sorry for Gay to bear her any ill-will. And her own secret, wonderful happiness had bestowed a kind of armor upon her, while making her all the more gentle and sympathetic to those who did not possess this immense source of joy. . . .

A light pierced the obscurity of the situation. Countess Selvi had said that Gay was the one who had most to lose by Anna's marriage. But wasn't it much more probable that she had in reality most to gain? If it was true, as Countess Selvi had seemed to suggest, that Gay and Michael had both been in favor of the marriage, wasn't it because since his coming to the Villa Caterina Gay had succeeded in her subtle little manœuvres and had effectually turned his thoughts passionately towards herself? She had played upon his pity; she had contrived, whether by his suggestion or not it was difficult to say, to absorb a great deal of his time. And no doubt she had been clever and shrewd enough to discern that Anna was the one obstacle in the way of her success. But Anna married to Selvi would be securely established, would be placed permanently out of Michael's way.

"Michael. . . ." Anna said aloud, almost entreatingly.

Suddenly as if in ironical answer to this pitiful appeal, a boat came in sight, just beyond the point of the little promontory upon which the villa was

situated. Gay, hatless and bare-armed, was rowing. Michael sat there, idly steering. The sea was calm and glassy as a mirror. Anna could see their reflections in the water, and the sharp blue shadow flung by the boat. She could hear too the sound of Gay's laughter. . . .

"Of course that's it," she said desolately.

Michael must have comforted Gay for his brother's faithlessness to such good purpose that she had easily been able to transfer her somewhat facile affections from Rodney to himself. The shadowy ideal of Rodney, blurred and attenuated by three years of separation and uncertainty, had been thrust into the background by the sensible, objective presence of Michael. There were points of physical resemblance between the two brothers, a certain similarity of voice and manner, so that if they were both in the room and you shut your eyes you would hardly know which of them was speaking. Rodney was taller, slimmer, more conventionally handsome than his brother, but he had not Michael's look of invincible strength, a quality that with him was not only physical but penetrated deeply into his very mentality. Anna knew that fundamentally they couldn't be compared, that Michael's character had a grace and beauty, an integrity of its own, a sternness, an austerity, a deep conscientiousness, of which the careless, pleasure-loving Rodney was utterly destitute.

Anna did not believe that Gay loved Michael. She wanted to conquer and win him and marry him from mixed motives of pique, ambition, and a restless quest for experience. It was a thing at once complex and to Anna utterly unintelligible.

The boat drifted nearer. Anna still sat there, trying to persuade herself that she need not fear Gay's scheming. When she next saw Michael alone

he would surely say something to dispel all her fears. And then hope dwindled a little; it had received such sharp and wounding blows that day. She knew too well the force of Gay's power to sway and stir all those with whom she came into contact. Released against her will from her engagement to Rodney, she had embarked with undiminished zest upon this new adventure which, while less thrilling in what it offered, promised a far greater degree of solidity and stability, and from a worldly point of view was not less desirable.

She saw the boat rounding the point, coming straight toward the wooden landing-stage at the bottom of the cliff steps. Echoes of voices and laughter reached Anna's ears across the water, full of the strange almost unreal beauty of sounds that are thus borne. When they came nearer, she could see Michael's face, brown and smiling, his head bending a little forward. Gay's back was turned to her, she was rowing with her easy accustomed strokes. The movements of her slim strong bare arms were rhythmic and full of the poetry of effortless motion. Little flashes of silver spray splashed from the oars like scintillating jewels. Yes, they were happy together, happy and absorbed. They wanted her—Anna—out of the way. Perhaps even now they were discussing the probabilities of this marriage with Selvi, and wondering how soon it would take place.

The boat disappeared behind the grove of ilex and pine-trees. Now they must have landed; must be coming up the steps. . . . Presently Anna could see them standing side by side on the terrace, looking out upon all the incomparable beauty of the scene, the silver-pale sea, the lovely pansy-colored mountains, the little coast-towns gleaming like ivory and touched with faint rose-colored shadows, the lustrous framing boughs of the pines. It was just beginning

to be stained with all the wonderful hues of sunset, not bright to-night or flaming, but delicate pastel tints, rose, lemon, a faint mauve, an indefinite green, little patches of turquoise floating on sky and water. . . .

Anna drew back into her room, as if unable to endure the sight of those two figures leaning over the balustrade, side by side, so close too, that in the distance their arms seemed to be touching. . . .

## CHAPTER XII

### THE PLOT SUCCEEDS

I

IT was not long before Anna heard a brisk decisive tap upon her door, and in reply to her preoccupied "Come in" Gay turned the handle and entered the room.

Her face was still glowing and flushed from the combined effects of exercise, and recent exposure to the slanting sun rays. Her white scanty dress hung loosely on her upright boyish form, the skirt, short nearly to the knees, displaying white shoes and stockings. Her dark hair was as usual very tidy and closely dressed; it was of the heavy kind that even sea-air cannot disturb. Her eyes were shining with a subdued triumph.

"I say, old thing, I'm dying to hear what the countess said to you about marrying Benny. We've been speculating about it—Michael and I. He's so astonished to think she could imagine his people had any right to oppose it or interfere. I'm sure though he's as keen on it as I am."

She stopped short, for Anna's expression changed, and her pale immobile face looked almost as if some inward fierce emotion had flowed suddenly over it. Something that was both anger and grief, indignation and fear. . . .

"She had no right whatever to discuss the affair with Michael. I told her when she first spoke to

me about it that I didn't want to marry her son. So it's no use your trying to *force* me into it, Gay!"

Gay stepped backward as if in instinctive withdrawal from something one had believed to be cold and inanimate and which had suddenly revealed fiery and almost menacing qualities. Anna had her full share of Nugent reserve and self-control, and always it was difficult to arouse her. The transformation was therefore almost terrifying, and for a moment Gay was actually frightened at what she had done.

Did Anna suspect that she playing for her own hand? Success hung in the balance, for a new light seemed to have been thrown upon the situation by the sudden disclosure that Michael had become a Catholic. But Gay did not believe that his conversion had had much to do with Anna, for if so, he would perhaps have waited until their engagement was actually accomplished before taking any definite step. Besides, he was not a man who would become a Catholic for any other reason but that he had coldly and formally accepted the authority and teaching of the Church. Nevertheless the news had disquieted her, because it forced her to realize that all this time a secret, to which she had not been admitted, had existed between Michael and Anna.

"What do you mean by saying *force* you into it?" demanded Gay, recovering her speech, and slightly losing her own temper. "You must be mad, Anna!"

"Don't try to deceive me, Gay," said Anna, in a cold voice that contrasted strangely with her fiery tones of a moment before. "You have tried to make Countess Selvi and Michael believe that I wished to marry Benny. And you know I've never had the slightest intention of doing so. You have been pushing the scheme for some purpose of your own."

Anna stopped short. She felt sick and exhausted

with this unaccustomed anger that had so shaken her out of her normal self-control. But it was as if an illumination, swift and sudden and piercing like a searchlight, had suddenly exposed Gay's unscrupulous little plot to mold her—Anna's—destiny according to the plan of her own desire.

Gay gave a short hard laugh that did not ring quite true.

"You little spitfire!" she said contemptuously. "I only wish I knew what the row was about. You sound frightfully jealous, Anna!"

Her scornful tone stung Anna. "Please leave me alone, Gay. I don't want to discuss it with you, and perhaps I was wrong to speak as I did. Only I want you to understand it's no use."

"No use? What on earth do you mean? I simply won't have you flying out at me like that! It's perfectly true that I wish you'd marry Selvi, for then I should be free to leave you and go away. I'm sick to death of this place. . . . But I shall just tell Michael what you've said to me, and leave him to put his own interpretation upon it, and I'm sure he'll recognize how unjust and suspicious and cruel you are. Pushing the scheme for some purpose of my own! What purpose could I have except a wish for your happiness? I was only afraid—ridiculous as it sounds now—that you might refuse Benny out of some quixotic consideration for myself. I see how mistaken I was. But even so you needn't have flown at *me* like a wild cat because Selvi wants to marry you!"

She flounced out of the room. When she had gone Anna had some difficulty in believing in the reality of the little scene. Her own fierce words . . . Gay's scornful repudiation of unworthy motives . . . her cruel determination to tell Michael. She would lay stress upon Anna's injustice, her un-

founded suspicions. She would tell him of her resolve to go away—of the absolute necessity of her leaving the Villa Caterina after what had passed between herself and Anna. Perhaps she would touch bitterly upon her own homeless position . . . Michael's pity would be aroused. It might indeed be so strongly aroused that he would blame Anna for her unjust treatment of her friend.

It seemed to Anna then that she had struck a clumsy, inexpert blow in her own defense. It hadn't succeeded, it had only made matters much worse. She had been wicked, too, to have such thoughts of Gay. Perhaps she had utterly misjudged her, and Gay had really believed she was furthering a marriage that would make Anna happy. Perhaps she had truly been blind, all the time, to Anna's own feeling for Michael.

She wrote a little note to Michael. "You must excuse my not coming down to dinner to-night. I'm not feeling very well, the heat has tired me. Gay will look after you."

Her inherent pride forced her to give Gay the initial advantage. She should be the first to see Michael and give him her version of the scene. Gay should tell her own story, coloring it as she so well knew how. Anna felt that Michael was now definitely lost to her. He would see her through Gay's eyes, as cruel, suspicious, vindictive, unfaithful to her own standards and ideals. If there had ever been any sentiment approaching to love in his heart for her, it must surely now suffer a revulsion so strong that it might perhaps change to actual hate. . . .

She could do nothing to keep them apart. Gay had complete command of the situation. Anna had never felt her power so strongly. She was certain, too, that she intended to win Michael. And she felt that she could not meet him again to-night, after

all that had passed. She ought to have kept silence, and when she felt perfectly calm she could have gone to Michael and assured him that she had no intention of marrying Selvi, that she had long ago told his mother so. There really had been no ambiguity in that first answer of hers; if she had hesitated at all it had been simply from a desire to save the countess from any vicarious pain and disappointment. And then the weaving of the little plot had begun. Even in the midst of her grief, Anna was able to exonerate the countess from any ulterior motive in her desire to consult Michael on the subject. But she could not bring herself to regard Gay's intervention as either innocent or altruistic. It had been accomplished with the deadly purpose of separating her from Michael, of making him believe that her feelings were involved, that she reciprocated Benny's love and wished to marry him. In her pursuit of Michael—for it amounted to that—Gay had not hesitated to make use of any and every weapon that she found lying in her path. And destiny had decreed that the weapons should be the very ones most suited and adapted to her work.

Later on, Anna could hear the low sustained murmur of their voices, as they sat out in the loggia beneath her window after dinner. She felt then as if she had in a sense surrendered Michael to Gay, deliberately aiding in the destruction of those dreams that had been so long, so dear. . . .

The twilight deepened, duskily blue like the bloom of a ripe grape. The pallor of the sea was brushed across with a darkening film of gray. The houses of the little port of Sant' Elena, tall, huddled, irregular, lit their fitful lamps that sent long golden rivers into the darkening water. The campanile of the Cathedral stood tall and pale above the houses, as if watching them protectively. In the garden the

pines and ilex-trees and cypresses were all massed together in one inky-black shadow, submerging their shapes and identities in that darkness except for the boughs that, advancing from the rest, were delicately etched against sea and sky. In straight sharp lines of golden lights the coast towns revealed themselves, lying at the foot of the mountains close to the sea. On one side she could perceive no less than three of those towns flickering their friendly signals to her across the wide, pale Bay. On the blunt hill of San Gervasio the lighthouse suddenly displayed its brilliant colorless ray, and then subsided into darkness for the space of a few seconds, when the revolving lamp was once more visible. The little lighthouse that stood at the end of the quay at Sant' Elena flashed out its answer, now ruby, now emerald-colored. Echoes of voices and laughter were borne across the water, and all the time there was a soft murmured accompaniment, the rhythmic fluid sound of tiny waves breaking on the rocks.

While Anna's eyes observed all these things with mechanical attention, her thoughts were wholly occupied with Michael. If she had wronged Gay in that moment of passion when she had been goaded out of her normal self-control by the afternoon's happenings, she had at least sought to make amends by yielding to her utterly this evening hour with Michael. She could picture them sitting in the loggia, smoking cigarettes, talking over the events of the day.

But Anna felt that she could not meet Michael yet. Jealous? Gay had flung the word at her with scorn, as if she had penetrated into Anna's heart and read its carefully-guarded secret. Jealous. . . . The word lashed her. But nevertheless she had loved and trusted Gay till the veils were torn from her eyes.

She sat there thinking, till one by one the lights

in the other houses were extinguished or concealed behind the close secretive wooden shutters. The whole world seemed to be wrapped in slumber, except herself and a few fishermen whose boats were rocking gently out there in the Bay.

She dreaded the morrow, the thought that she would have to see Michael. . . .

## 2

Michael was alone on the terrace the next morning when Anna came out to breakfast. She had risen at five, after a wakeful night, and had gone to a very early Mass in a convent chapel. She didn't even want that walk home with Michael which had been such a delicious thing of late.

"Where's Gay? Have you seen her?" said Anna.

"Bathing," said Michael, laconically.

Anna poured out a cup of coffee and gave it to him. They sat down to breakfast, Anna very pale and silent with heavy shadows round her eyes; Michael sitting opposite a little puzzled at the whole situation. The pieces didn't seem to fit together, somehow. Only what was quite clear to him was that there had been a very unfortunate squabble between the two girls.

Anna, who was almost raw with sensitiveness just then, believed that his silence betrayed reproach and condemnation. Perhaps he really believed that she had attacked Gay without cause. A lump rose in her throat. She drank some coffee, but could eat nothing.

"You're not eating, Anna."

"I'm not hungry."

"I say, what's the row between you and Gay?"

"What has she told you?" said Anna, leaning

forward a little and fixing her clear gray eyes upon him.

"Oh, well, she told me you'd said she was trying to push this marriage between you and Selvi for motives of her own. I think you were unjust, Anna. What motive could she possibly have except a wish for your happiness?"

A flush stained the pallor of her face. So he did blame her. He had accepted unquestioningly Gay's version of the story.

"She was simply awfully upset about the whole thing," continued Michael; "she wanted to go away first thing this morning. I urged her not to do that. I felt, you see, that there must be some mistake."

"I was angry with her for encouraging Countess Selvi to believe that I wanted to marry her son." Anna did not look at Michael as she spoke. Her voice was low and troubled.

"Well, if she did, you must give her credit for having believed that you wished it—that your happiness was concerned."

"My happiness!" said Anna, bitterly.

"You see she's so tremendously fond of you. And I suppose it hurt her to think you could so—misjudge her. . . ."

The lump threatened to choke her. Michael didn't understand, and she couldn't possibly explain the matter to him without showing him an impossible glimpse of her own heart.

"It's so awfully unlike you, Anna. I can't understand. . . ." He looked at her almost wistfully.

"But she knew that I only liked Benny as a friend," protested Anna. "Why should she pretend to his mother that I want to marry him? I couldn't get the countess to believe me. She thinks that I'm hesitating—that I don't know my own mind. . . ."

"Oh, I'm sure she didn't imply anything quite as

definite as that," said Michael uneasily, not able to remember exactly what Gay's words had been, and yet conscious that they had produced that unfortunate impression upon himself. Gay had eagerly espoused Selvi's cause, as if she were aware from her very intimacy with Anna that she wished to marry him. Both Michael and the countess had been ready to accept Gay's opinion, because if she didn't know what Anna felt about it, who did?

Anna thought: "What motive could she have had unless it was to get me out of the way—to make the path clear for herself and Michael?"

And perhaps she had already succeeded. Michael, more dear than ever, even in his austere condemnation of her, seemed infinitely removed. It was true, then—he regarded her still as a child to be rebuked and corrected. The thought lashed her pride. She felt humiliated. She had never been to him a woman to be loved, and at that moment her own love for him seemed like a fierce consuming thing that was eating up her very life. And it was stained with shame because he had no love to give her in return. . . .

"Do forgive Gay for anything she may have said or done," he said suddenly in a more gentle voice. "She—she needs your friendship, Anna. This has hurt her more than you think." His tone was urgent. What would Gay do if she lost Anna as well as Rodney? . . .

"Has it? I am sorry," said Anna, helplessly. She hardly knew what she was saying, the pain of it all bewildered and confused her. She seemed to see Michael's face across drifting mists. So he was learning to love Gay, with all her beauty, her waywardness, her strange fascinating power. He was beginning to respond. He was going to repair his brother's want of fidelity, in the most practical man-

ner imaginable. He was going to lift Gay from the dust whither Rodney's careless defection had flung her.

"I expect you're quite right, Michael. I—misjudged her," she said in a cold, emotionless voice.

Breakfast was finished. Anna rose from the table and went towards the house with a face of stone. In that moment she seemed to be bidding Michael a definite and eternal farewell.

Gay had come between them so adroitly that even Michael himself had never suspected it. Gay was the innocent, the injured one. He was shifting his support to her side. That was why he had been so cold and stern and condemnatory. The work of disillusionment had already begun.

Anna was persuaded now that he had never cared for her at all. She ought to have listened to Mrs. Nugent's warning. It had been a wise counsel, and she would have done well to heed it.

But her pride was up in arms.

"I'll do what they wish—I'll marry Selvi," she thought. "It can't matter what happens to me now."

She must show them all that she didn't care. She must make the path smooth and easy for them. She was, in spite of all things, just a little in their way. . . .

And then suddenly she had a great longing to go way from Sant' Elena, with all its shining delicate beauty, its wide pale Bay, and lovely wooded mountainous shores. She had been perfectly happy there until Michael came, regarding those intervening months as a time of probation, of necessary waiting. A time of quiet preparation for the happiness that she had truly believed was in store for her. Gay had destroyed it all.

"Gay, I'm sorry I was so horrid to you last night. Do forgive me, and try to forget it. I've come to ask you, too, not to go away."

Anna's forgiveness was quite genuine; it welled up a stormy emotion from her heart, which felt as if it must be breaking.

When she looked at Gay now in her hard beauty, her assurance, her efficiency, she thought miserably: "Of course he loves her. It's only natural. I ought to have foreseen it. She conquered Rodney just as easily."

Gay did not speak. She gazed at Anna with an astonished, incredulous expression from which a certain relief was not altogether absent.

"Michael's shown me I was wrong," Anna added quietly.

"Michael!" repeated Gay.

"Yes. He was almost angry with me." Her voice had a slight quiver in it, but her face was stonily calm.

She felt that she was looking at Gay for the first time as Michael's future wife. What other sequel could have logically closed his visit? And she mustn't quarrel with her, just for that reason. She mustn't grudge her this happiness. She was blaming herself for that passionate outburst more than Michael had ever blamed her. And, after all, was it not in a sense his own doing, since he had learned in these few past weeks to care so much for Gay? Destiny had thrown those two eminently attractive, intelligent people together. And the very nature of Michael's mission to Sant' Elena had given him a certain initial advantage and power.

"I think that perhaps you and Michael——" said Anna, timidly. Even now she could not put it into words.

"Oh, you've seen, then, that I was getting keen about Michael?" said Gay, in her frank easy manner. "He's like Rodney, but a thousand times more dependable, and reliable. And you'd always assured me there was nothing between you. If I'd thought there had been, you know, I should have sneered off."

"No—there was never anything between us," said Anna, calmly. Nothing but the whole of her life's love, which he did not need. . . .

"And perhaps that's why I thought that you and Selvi. . . . Anyhow I'm awfully sorry I upset you by giving the countess a wrong impression. I felt so certain that was what you wanted. But I oughtn't to have interfered—I don't wonder you felt a bit wild with me. I'm glad, though, that you didn't really mean it."

She went up to Anna and kissed her with something of her old affection.

"You can never guess what you've done for me," she whispered, with tears in her dark eyes. "I don't think I've ever really cared for anyone in my life before. It was never like this with Rodney—I think now there was always a certain amount of ambition mixed up with my feeling for him. A wish to be rich and independent . . . you know how I hated having to slave for my living. Never being able just to enjoy myself like other girls! Some women like working," she went on musingly, "but I never did. I had capacity, and circumstances compelled me to use it."

Anna listened as one in a dream. So Gay felt certain that she was going to marry Michael. He

must have said something—given her at least some hint—for her to speak with this assurance and so unashamedly of her own love for him.

"Oh, how happy she must be—how wonderful—" Anna thought. She returned Gay's kiss almost timidly. She must never guess, never know. Still less must Michael know. But the destruction of her dream was complete now; it had perished even as she listened to Gay's frank, explicit statements.

"Dear Gay," she murmured, something of her old feeling for her strangely returning. All her anger had vanished, and in its place she was surprised to find a new tenderness for her—for the woman whom Michael loved and who was to make him happy. Some day perhaps they would think of her gratefully for having thus brought them together. . . .

Her forgiveness of Gay had an eager quality, as if it came like an impetuous stream from her heart blotting out all the unkind hostile thoughts she had had only yesterday. Enmity and anger seemed to her then like evil black fluids flowing over the soul and staining it.

She put her arms around Gay's neck.

"Oh, Gay, forgive me for all my unkind thoughts and words!"

Gay laughed, and her laughter held a happy contented sound. "What a tender conscience you've got, you baby! As if it mattered!"

And she left Anna, and went singing down the stairs.

Anna looking from the loggia a little later saw them going out in the boat. Gay was rowing, and Michael sat opposite to her; she felt that they were looking into each other's faces, serenely content and satisfied.

Of course they loved each other. It would be a beautiful marriage for Gay. Michael, as a zealous

convert, would not rest till he had brought her back to the practice of her religion. He would want that for Gay. She must put her soul into his hands, too. He would always be able to feel perhaps that he had helped to save that soul; that his own conversion had been very swift to bear fruit.

The water flashed from the oars, sparkling like diamond drops. Soon Gay had rowed swiftly round the point of San Gervasio, and the boat with its occupants vanished.

Some lines she had once read somewhere came into Anna's mind then; she repeated them to herself almost mechanically:

By the blue sea to-day  
You stood long by my side,  
Watching the sunshine play  
Upon the bright blue bay,  
As though you had not died. . . .

*'As though you had not died. . . .* Yes, she had lost Michael as truly and as surely as if he had died. She must never think of him again. She raised her hand and waved it towards San Gervasio in a kind of symbolic, eternal farewell. . . .

## 4

Evening had come and the boat had not returned. Anna had hardly expected her guests to hurry back; she felt that this would be an important day for them both. Perhaps when they did return they would be able to tell her of their engagement.

This thought had been with her all day, and instead of banishing it as something unpleasant and distasteful, she had forced herself to regard it bravely.

She wanted to be able to congratulate them sincerely, when they did come to her with this wonderful piece of news on their lips. She wanted to feel, too, something of the pleasure she was going to express. Sacrifice had been demanded of her—a heavy bitter sacrifice, and she was determined to offer it gladly. One could always bear things, so she had been taught, by looking at them quite supernaturally. And it was thus in her imperfect, hesitating, human way that she tried now to look at this impending event. She wondered a little that she should feel so chilled and shaken, despite her high courage.

Already the colored lights of sunset were beginning to float over the Bay, shifting in kaleidoscopic fashion. The mountains were assuming their dark mysterious evening robes of royal purple. The forests were wrapped in shadow as if preparing for slumber. Far off, a young crescent moon was floating over the headland of Spezia.

She heard steps in the hall and looked up, expecting to see Gay and Michael. Instead, her eyes rested upon the tall vigorous form of young Selvi.

She had not seen him for quite a long time—not indeed since the day when his mother had first sounded her on the question of their marriage. She could not be blind now to his expression of triumphant pleasure at discovering her thus alone.

"Have your guests gone out?" he asked, when the first slightly embarrassed greetings were over.

"Yes. They've been out all day in the boat."

She glanced a little wistfully towards the promontory of San Gervasio that had hidden the boat from her view that morning. She was thinking, too, of that first wonderful day of Michael's coming, when the seed had surely been sown for Gay's present golden harvest.

Benny was dressed in English fashion like most

Italian youths. Yet to an observant spectator there were subtle differences in the details of his attire. His soft silk shirt had a slightly wider collar, and his hair instead of being cropped close to his head was worn rather long in front and brushed straight back in a wavy plume from his square fine forehead. But these things added a certain picturesque quality to his appearance. He had a profile like an antique Roman medal, clearly cut and practically perfect in line. He was tall, dark, and slender; there was something graceful, too, about his pose as he flung himself back into a wicker chair.

"Anna—I'm tired of waiting," he said suddenly.

The color spread over her face like a slow stain. She was thinking rebelliously: "Oh, if I could have heard Michael say that!"

"And I wish the handsome cousin would go away," continued Benny, imperturbably.

"I daresay he will go soon," said Anna. "But he has nothing to do with—the question of your waiting."

As she spoke she realized how definitely and completely Michael was lost to her. Over there, behind the promontory where the water ran deep in hues of emerald and peacock blue, Michael was even now perhaps telling Gay that he loved her. . . .

She wondered if the pain would ever become less, would ever die.

"There's no one, then?" he said.

"No one."

Benny smiled. Like most Italians he was simple and subtle, jealous and passionate.

"Will you marry me, Anna, since there's no one else? I've been so afraid of the handsome cousin!"

Anna was silent.

"I think my mother's told you how much I love you. We can have such a happy life here at Sant'

Elena. I believe at heart you're much more Italian than English. And so am I. . . ."

She was still silent. She was weighing his words. If she consented to marry him wouldn't that show Michael very clearly indeed that she didn't care? That he was perfectly free? That the old friendship, intimate and tender too in its way, counted for nothing now? . . .

"Yes, I will marry you," she said, in a toneless voice.

Benedetto came across to where she was sitting and bending down he took her hand in his and kissed it.

"I love you," he said, "we shall be perfectly happy. You shall never go back to your cold England."

He wondered afterwards why her hand, on that hot evening, should have been as cold as ice as it lay in his.

"It will make my mother so happy, too. She has always wished to have you as a daughter." He longed to hear her say that she loved him too, but there was something cold and unresponsive about her that checked and frightened him.

"Tell me that you'll marry me very soon, Anna. There's nothing on earth to wait for, is there? Mr. Nugent told my mother you were absolutely free to decide these things for yourself."

"I must think it over, Benny—I'm feeling bewildered. Do you mind if I ask you to leave me quite alone?"

There was something piteous, almost childish, in her appeal.

"Of course." He rose, kissed her hand again, lingering a little over the embrace this time. "But I may come again very soon, may I not? To-morrow?"

"Yes, to-morrow."

"In the morning?"

"Yes. In the morning."

"And I may tell my mother the good news?"

"Yes, do tell her." She smiled faintly.

"To-morrow," he said, "you must promise me that the wedding shall be very soon."

"You must let me think it over. Perhaps I shan't want to have it just yet."

His face fell a little. He was so eager, but his love failed to sweep Anna on the warm tide of its current. Perhaps she dreaded yielding up her present complete liberty. Her life here was free and happy, and the prospect of any change might conceivably terrify her. But he had won her promise, just when he was beginning to feel most hopeless, and he must be content with that.

He went away, his face aglow with excitement and happiness, although her cold unresponsiveness had chilled him a little. But she was very young, he told himself, hardly more than a child.

As he went down the path to the gate he heard voices on the terrace. Turning his head abruptly he saw two tall figures silhouetted darkly against the flaming gold of the sky. They were Michael Nugent and Gay Lawton. Once he had feared their influence over Anna, seeing in them both people who might for their own reasons wish to step in and prevent the marriage. But in his new happiness he could look at them with indifference.

He went out of the gate into the highroad without attempting to greet them.

## CHAPTER XIII

### AN AWKWARD THING TO PLAY WITH SOULS

#### I

ANNA heard them come into the house. To avoid meeting them just then, she slipped out through the door of the loggia, and, skirting the edge of the cliff by a path that was little used, she gained the terrace without being observed.

The twilight was rapidly spreading its dusky-blue veils over the sky, sea and mountains. Spica trembled in the south-west, a sharp glittering point of light.

The fragrance of tuberose and jessamine was almost suffocating in the still, hot, evening air. There was scarcely a breath from the sea, which lay there calm and pale as a mirror. Westward a rim of twinkling lights revealed a little town that had sunk obscured into the shadows.

She was standing there so lost in thought that she did not hear the sound of approaching footsteps. It was not till Michael was actually standing beside her that she perceived his presence.

He had come to tell her. She smiled, waiting for him to speak.

"Anna—you avoid me. I never see you now. I'm afraid I offended you this morning by my plain speaking. Forgive me."

One of her hands was resting on the stone ledge of the balustrade, and to her surprise he laid his upon it. She did not move. His touch, unexpectedly tender, unnerved her a little.

"You were quite right to say what you did. And there is really nothing to forgive." Her eyes, as they met his, were dull and heavy.

"And all day I've been thinking that was why you wouldn't come out with us," he said gently. "But Anna—you really mustn't let me in for any more long days with Gay. This one has seemed perfectly unending. I want to be kind to her as you know—but there's a limit to my unselfishness!"

Unselfishness? What did he mean?

"My time here is so short now that I do want to see as much of you as possible!"

Anna withdrew her hand. Her face softened and lost its look of rigidity. It seemed to her that, strangely and miraculously, Michael had returned to her. But it was too late. Just a couple of hours too late. . . .

"By the way, Selvi's been here, hasn't he? I thought I saw him leaving the house just as we were coming in."

"Yes, he's been here," said Anna dully.

"Is he making things difficult for you, Anna?" asked Michael.

"No—no! . . . Michael—I'd like you to be the first to know. I have promised to marry Benny. He came to ask me to be his wife—and I gave him that answer."

Michael's face grew rigid. He too became conscious of the stifling fragrance of the tuberoses standing there like a pale scented army, with their stiff columns of white stars. The lisp of water against the rocks teased him with its monotonous sound. He seemed to be regarding Anna from an immense, an incalculable distance. She was going to marry Selvi, after all her indignant asseverations to the contrary. That was how she had used that freedom he had secretly accorded to her. To set eternal barriers be-

tween them, just when he believed his own hopes were about to materialize.

"You knew he was coming? Is that why you wanted to get rid of me to-day?"

The appalling injustice of this suspicion hardly wounded her. She answered quite calmly: "No, I'd no idea he was coming."

"Do you *love* him, Anna?" he demanded, so fiercely that she shrank a little away from him.

Oh, why had he not made things quite clear to her before it was too late? She seemed to have cast away his love of her own will.

"You've no right to ask me that." Her voice was cold and steady.

His anger subsided, leaving only sadness.

"That's true. But I've one right at least—the right my own love for you gives me. . . . to know that this is for your happiness."

*My own love for you. . . .* Was she dreaming or had he really spoken those words? She felt that she would carry them forever in her heart as well as in her memory.

She knew now that Michael loved her, had always loved her. What foolish scruple had kept him silent for so long?

"Are you going to be married soon?"

"I don't know. He wants it to be soon."

She tried to picture herself going up the aisle of the Cathedral dressed as a bride, all in white—with a white veil and the kind of head-dress that modern brides wear. Benny there waiting for her, his eager glowing face, his dark bright eyes. Countess Selvi looking on with smiles and tears. The *parroco* standing there. The red faldstools. . . .

She shrank from the picture. It was incredible. She must have been mad. Her misery had forced her into this bitter dilemma. Yet all the time she

had only wished to make the path quite clear for Michael and Gay. . . .

But perhaps something would happen before that dreadful day came. She would try to put it off. She would pray that Benny might cease to care for her. Almost she would pray to die before that marriage could take place.

"I shall leave to-morrow, Anna," said Michael. "The early train—there's one about nine, isn't there?" He moved a step away.

"To-morrow?"

Yes, that would be the final parting. He would never return. He would never try to see her again. They would be lost to each other.

"Yes. Even you can hardly pretend that you want my presence now!"

"I—I have never pretended," she said.

But he misinterpreted her, as it seemed to her wilfully. "No—to be perfectly fair you haven't! You've thrown me into Gay's society morning, noon, and night. But I never guessed it was because you liked to have these Selvis hanging around!"

In his rising anger he was scarcely conscious of what he was saying nor of the insult his words conveyed.

"He hasn't been hanging around. I hadn't seen Benny for weeks till to-day," said Anna.

Oh, why did he stand there flinging hard and sarcastic words at her—hinting, too, of a love about which until now he had been so scrupulously silent? It couldn't be that all the time he had cared, and never told her so, when he had even made her believe that he was in love with another woman? Yet the fact that he hadn't cared for Gay revealed itself clearly for the first time. He had wanted—oh, irony of ironies!—to be rescued from Gay. . . .

"I suppose it would be banal to say that I shall

never marry," he went on, "but that's what I feel about it at present. Oh, Anna, you assured me only yesterday that you didn't care for Selvi—that you didn't want to marry him! You almost quarreled with Gay for daring to suggest to his mother that you did. What has come over you to change you so?"

He stood in front of her as if demanding the truth from her. And what could she say? That she loved him and that she had made a perfectly useless sacrifice, so that the path might be clear for him to marry Gay?

"It will do no harm to tell you now that I love you," he went on, in a low thrilling voice, that to her ears seemed to be filled with a most matchless music. "But I didn't mean to speak yet. It didn't seem quite fair—you were so young—so inexperienced—you had met scarcely any men but myself, and there was the old friendship between us which began when you were a little girl. I thought it would be best to leave you alone for a year or two. And now this Selvi has stepped in where I feared to tread. . . ."

No harm to tell you now that I love you . . . it didn't seem quite fair. . . . I thought it would be best to leave you alone for a year or two. . . . Fragments of these sentences buzzed in her brain, like an imperfect phonograph record, echoing with a sort of rough rhythm.

"But I do love you, Anna—always, remember that!" He came a step nearer, and now his voice was all changed and tender. "And I've got to thank you for other things, too—for taking me up to the door of the Catholic Church . . . for opening all that world to me. So it hasn't all been lost. . . . And now there's nothing left for me but to wish you every happiness. I'm sure you will be happy. I'm equally sure you wouldn't marry Selvi unless you cared for him. You'll settle out here forever now."

"Michael—don't go!" she cried, putting out her hand as if to detain him.

He had just turned as if going toward the house when she stopped him. She felt that this was perhaps the last time she would ever see him quite alone.

"Had you anything else to tell me?" he said, looking down at her pale face that made him think of some white flower in the dusk.

"Then you never thought of—marrying Gay?" she said, in a voice that was not quite steady.

"My dear child, what on earth do you mean? Marry Gay!"

There was amusement as well as scorn in his voice.

"You didn't like going about with her always?"

"I liked her as a companion, but one gets very tired of her. And every day I hoped that you'd say you were coming. It was Gay suggested that you might want to stay at home in case the Selvis came. Gay tried to prepare me—I see that now—but I didn't, I couldn't, believe her."

"I thought you meant to make up to her for all Rodney's faithlessness."

"My darling Anna, you've invented a charming little romance, but I should never wish to marry Gay; nor would she, I'm certain, ever want to marry me. It's true I thought that going about a bit with her might take her thoughts off her disappointment, but I've missed in consequence many many hours of you. Even to-day—my last. . . ."

When he thought of Anna and Selvi a kind of rage possessed him. He still believed that the countess had over-persuaded Anna, had in a sense prevailed upon her to marry her son. But he had never thought that Anna would be so easily overpowered. For all her look of fragility she had plenty of strength and vigor. She could hold her own. There was sterner

stuff in Anna than perhaps anyone but himself would give her credit for.

He made a last effort. "You're sure—you're perfectly sure—that you care for this Selvi? Oh, Anna, it isn't too late for you to draw back. Only don't ruin your beautiful life, my darling!"

"Oh, Michael, don't torture me," she whispered, looking up at him with terrified eyes.

"Because, if you're not sure, do for heaven's sake let me take you back with me to London to-morrow!"

"No—no—that's impossible—" she said.

He turned away abruptly then and walked towards the house. His footsteps fell firmly on the gravel path. It was only then she realized that he had offered her a last chance of escape—had wanted her to leave Sant' Elena with him and go back to London . . . and she had refused. She had given her word to Benny—even Michael could hardly wish her to withdraw it that very same day. He would only think her capricious and faithless, not knowing her own mind. She felt as if she must have forfeited in this last half hour something of that love which all these months had been so surely hers.

She was once more alone, and almost unable to believe in the reality of the conversation that had just taken place, even as last night it had seemed impossible that she and Gay could have said such cruel and angry things to each other. All these succeeding scenes were to her part of an evil dream from which she would surely soon awake to find those old crystal-clear relations with Michael still happily prevailing. He didn't love Gay; he loved her, and because of this love he was going away on the morrow, unable to witness her happiness in which he had no share. *I love you*—yes, at last she had heard those words from his lips.

In the midst of her grief they brought her an indescribable joy.

"Something will happen—something must happen—" she thought.

She had been the victim of a hideous mistake. She had believed that Michael and Gay wished to be together. And Michael, prompted by Gay, had believed that Anna had remained at home in order to see Selvi. They had been at cross-purposes from beginning to end. It was humorous, grotesque, farcical, and yet so heart-breaking. . . .

She heard Gay's voice: "Anna! Anna! Aren't you coming in? It's ages past dinner time."

She went slowly back to the house.

2

"I'm leaving to-morrow," said Michael to Gay, that evening after dinner when they were all three sitting in the loggia.

She looked up quickly. "Oh, are you? Isn't that rather a sudden decision?"

"Yes, it's sudden in a way. But I've heard news to-night that makes it absolutely necessary for me to go home."

Even Gay noticed his cold, changed voice. Michael was the least vain of men, but he had come to the reluctant conclusion at last, that she had had some special motive in persuading him that Anna was going to marry Selvi. He didn't in the least know what it was, but she had plotted and schemed with such success that the engagement, which yesterday had seemed so unlikely, was to-day an accomplished and apparently irremediable fact.

Gay did not question him. So far she held no clew to the truth. But both Michael and Anna had

been very silent during dinner, and she felt convinced now that whatever had happened to drive him away from the Villa Caterina, it was something that sensibly affected them both. What could it be? Her conscience was not altogether easy. She was aware of having quibbled and prevaricated, and deliberately induced Michael and the countess to believe that Anna intended to marry Benedetto. But even supposing he had discovered all that—and Anna had come alarmingly near to the truth last night—that was scarcely an adequate reason for his sudden departure and his strangely altered looks. No—something had happened of which they were both aware, and she was not to be let into the secret. She looked from one to the other, but their grave, reserved “Nugent” faces betrayed nothing.

Michael went up to his room rather earlier than usual to make his few preparations for the journey. He was still feeling dazed, a little stunned, and utterly unable to understand why Anna had done this thing.

Gay accompanied Anna up to her room in the turret, and would have gone in for a chat as she often did, but Anna quietly said:

“I’m tired to-night, Gay. I want to be alone.”

“Oh, all right, old thing. Good-night,” said Gay.

She heard the scraping sound of a key turned in the lock. So Anna was going to ensure herself against interruptions. And yet that trivial little action made Gay feel more uneasy than before.

“But they can’t really prove anything,” she thought confidently.

That night, however, she hardly slept at all, but tossed restlessly on her bed. It was the unusual heat, she told herself, but all the time she felt that something terrible must have happened to drive Michael away like that. She had been with him nearly all day,

and he had been just as usual, cheerful, interested, apparently well amused. And he had made no mention of returning to England. Something must have happened. . . .

"I must get it out of Anna," she thought.

Her heart sank a little when she thought of Michael's going. It would be hateful at Villa Caterina without him. Of the larger issues which were at stake she dared not think.

### 3

They all breakfasted together quite early on the terrace, and Anna and Gay both walked up to the station with Michael to witness his departure.

To Anna it was almost a relief to see him buying his ticket, tipping the porter, flinging a newspaper into a corner seat when the train came in . . . just the normal ordinary things a man did when setting out on a journey.

His face was composed though not cheerful. There was no trace of last night's storm upon it. He did not see Anna alone before he started, and no word of an intimate kind passed between them. Gay's silent presence had prevented that. They had both secretly hoped that she would not go to the station, but she seemed to think it a matter of course that she should accompany them.

Michael's hard face had betrayed no emotion when he said good-bye to Anna; it looked singularly rigid and inflexible. Idly he wondered what Gay would do when Anna's marriage took place. But a girl so eminently capable and efficient would be certain to fall on her feet. Anna would help her to find another job. And she had a good friend too, in Mrs. Phipps-Moxon. . . . Probably she would marry, and she would make an excellent comrade, tireless, ener-

getic, capable and efficient. What a nonsensical idea that had been of Anna's to imagine that he and Gay——!

The station was filled with an acrid odor of smoke and hot oil. The black smoke from the train seemed to smudge the wonderful crystal light of the summer morning. Anna turned away from it almost with relief. It was terrible to part from Michael in this way, knowing now that he loved her and yet being unable to tell him that his love was reciprocated a thousand-fold.

She walked soberly down the steep dusty hill with Gay. On their way to the villa they passed a gipsy woman carrying a brown baby, with a couple of older children nearly as dark as Arabs clinging to her tough, shabby skirt. She held out her lean bronzed hand and whined for an alms. Her head was covered with a bright cotton handkerchief, and her face was almost mahogany-colored. When she smiled she showed white cruel teeth like a wolf's; they flashed in the lean, wrinkled brownness of her face. Anna thrust an alms into the outstretched hand, and hurried away. She was haunted by the evil reckless expression, the snarling mouth. It seemed almost like a bad omen meeting her just then. . . .

"Why has he gone?" demanded Gay, suddenly, as they neared the gate. She could contain her curiosity no longer, and she was beginning to feel exasperated at Anna's continued silence.

"He wanted to go home," said Anna, feebly. She would have staved off the moment of revelation had it been possible.

But Gay was not satisfied. She took Anna's arm and held it firmly.

"Nonsense!" she said in a voice so husky that it sounded almost hoarse, "there must have been some other reason. What was it, Anna?"

"It was just as he said—he had news—it made it impossible for him to stay. . . ."

"You're hiding something from me," said Gay.

They had entered the garden, but she still held Anna's arm as if determined that she should not escape till she had revealed the truth.

Her own misgivings had deepened. She could have screamed at Anna's obstinate silence.

"You must tell me," she said; "I insist upon knowing."

"He wanted to go," repeated Anna. "Perhaps he found it dull here."

"Are you going to marry him, Anna?" demanded Gay. Her eyes were sharp and keen as a sword, and held too something of a sword's steely menacing glitter.

"No—no—do please let me go, Gay," said Anna. The grip of Gay's fingers on her arm hurt her. She longed to escape from her, from her torturing questions, her hostile glances. She was almost afraid of her at that moment.

Gay released her with a gesture of brutal dismissal, as if she were flinging her off.

"Then what's the row about?" she asked.

Anna hesitated. Then she said: "Gay—I think you ought to know. I'm engaged to Count Selvi."

"You? Engaged to Benny? When you absolutely denied there was anything between you?" Gay gazed at her in blank and suspicious surprise.

"He came to see me last evening when you were out. He asked me to marry him."

"But what has that to do with Michael's going?" asked Gay.

But even as she uttered the words the truth came upon her in a flash. And the flash struck her like a burning blow, as if it had sprung from an electrical, lightning-like source.

"When did you tell Michael?"

"As soon as he came in last night. He found me on the terrace. I told him then."

"And that's why he went away?"

"Yes," said Anna.

Gay paused for a moment, then she said:

"So he was in love with you all the time?"

Anna did not speak.

"Oh, how could you refuse him?" said Gay.

"I didn't refuse him. He never asked me to marry him."

"Still, he didn't seem to feel like being a spectator of Selvi's happiness," said Gay, bitterly.

Everything had happened just as she had planned and plotted. The pawns had moved to their appropriate places on the board. Only Michael had refused to play his part. He had received the news of Anna's engagement with outward calm. One could not glimpse in him the broken-hearted man. His Nugent reserve had covered all trace of emotion. But he had gone away. That was the point at which her plan had broken down and failed utterly.

Always she had felt certain that if Anna's engagement to Selvi took place, Michael would turn to her, perhaps indeed with relief. Instead he had vanished precipitately from the scene. She knew now that among her clever, facile conquests she could never number Michael Nugent.

"Gay—I'm sorry—I thought perhaps you and Michael——"

"Thought? Why don't you say you were afraid? You always hated the idea—it made you jealous and gloomy."

They had reached the house. Between the boughs of pine and ilex they could see the sea, its blue deepening as the sun rose stronger.

"You've been a changed woman since he came.

He must have noticed it, too. And yet all the time you must have known you intended to marry Benny," Gay said bitterly. More than ever was she mystified at the turn of events. But one fact stood out with a terrible unequivocal clearness—Michael had loved Anna all the time. And because of her engagement he had gone away. There had never been any hint or suggestion on his part that he wished to see her—Gay—again.

She had been secretly scheming for this marriage to take place, and she had made herself believe that when the engagement was announced, Michael would ask her to be his wife. Now the unwelcome truth was forced upon her, that he had never cared for her at all. He had believed, perhaps, that she still loved his brother, whom he had so completely supplanted. All that he had done and said had been in a friendly endeavor to console her for Rodney's defection. And all the time he had loved Anna.

What she couldn't understand was how Anna, having this wonderful love offered to her, could promise to marry Count Selvi.

Gay refused to think the tangle was of her own weaving. There didn't exist a scrap of evidence to prove the work was hers. An adroit suggestion here—an observation there—a reluctance to hint prematurely at what was going forward—these had been her skilfully wielded weapons. Nevertheless the magnitude of the results affected her uncomfortably. She had pushed Anna into an engagement with Selvi, successfully persuading her that Michael didn't care for her. And now she had driven Michael away from Sant' Elena. The one solid irrevocable consequence of her scheming was this engagement of Anna's. That it wasn't bringing her happiness, it was quite easy to see. She was utterly without that mixture of joy, timidity, and triumph which most

girls display in similar circumstances. She was just a shade more grave and cool and composed than before. Gay was a little aghast and conscience-stricken as she considered all these things.

'Tis an awkward thing to play with souls,  
And matter enough to save one's own. . . .

Gay knew perfectly well that Anna's life would be ruined if she married Selvi. She had never cared for him, and the countess's importunate action had rendered her miserable during these last weeks. Even now she hardly made any pretense of loving him. Her motive was not clear to Gay, who for her part shrank from trying to probe it. She was afraid of finding too great a measure of consideration for herself, besides a touch of pique following on the deep wound to Anna's pride when she had been encouraged to believe that Michael cared for Gay and not for herself.

There was, however, some consolation in the thought that Michael and Anna were effectually separated. So much had been achieved, though with an abruptness that was slightly bewildering. His departure had been sudden and decisive, like the fall of a curtain at the end of an act. Gay had never admired so much as she had done that morning, his coolness, his impassivity, his iron self-control. Those Nugent characteristics of reserve, silence, and an unplumbed power of endurance were attractive to her. One might laugh at them, but they were very enviable. Anna was a fool. . . . She ought to have fought for her happiness, instead of letting it slip through her fingers. It had been hers for the taking. . . .

But then Anna, like all the Nugents—and despite the warm Italian blood that ran in her veins—was utterly inscrutable.

## 4

It was a relief to Countess Selvi to learn of the unexpected departure of the English cousin. Not that she had ever suspected him of being in the least in love with Anna himself, but she felt that such influence as he possessed would all be used against, rather than in favor of, the marriage.

Anna spent a great deal of time at the Villa Selvi. She preferred meeting Benny in his mother's house. The countess had acquired old-fashioned Italian ideas upon the amount of liberty which should be accorded to engaged couples. She chaperoned Anna assiduously, so that she scarcely saw Benny for five minutes alone. He was a little restive under these restrictions, but Anna gratefully accepted them, and wondered if as time went on she would acquire any other feeling towards her engagement than that of an active distaste.

She had given her word, had no intention of withdrawing it, but she still cherished an immense childish hope that "something" would intervene to separate herself from Benny before the crucial day should arrive.

Benny, however, seemed to have enough happiness for two. He was very much in love, and attributed Anna's coldness to something that was inexplicably yet delightfully English in her character. That would all be changed when she was his wife, and his efforts to hurry on the wedding were almost pathetic to behold.

The countess saw no reason why it should be postponed later than October, and the end of that month had been tacitly fixed. Anna could therefore look forward to another two months of this mitigated freedom. But it was nevertheless very different from

her old absolute liberty. The countess had in a sense taken command of her son's future wife. Many quite ordinary things were condemned as strange and English. It was enough to make one doubt, Anna used sometimes to think, whether Countess Selvi had really been born an Englishwoman, so eager was she to adopt the old-fashioned prejudices that still prevailed among certain sections of society in Italy.

"And you must think about your trousseau, my dear child," she said one day. "I know some nuns who will make your things beautifully. I will take you to the convent to-morrow."

Anna was aghast. She had not given a thought to her trousseau, and she could not tell the countess how eminently distasteful the contemplation of it was to her. She had lots of clothes—why buy any more? But after a moment's consideration, she acquiesced meekly: "Very well—I suppose we ought to see about it soon. Next week perhaps—"

This tendency to procrastinate seemed to point to a certain weakness of character, the countess thought. Still she preferred that Benny's wife should have a weak character rather than a strong one. A woman who at such an early age had been accorded such a very complete measure of liberty might well have demanded an equivalent independence in her new life. The countess had, however, always ruled the Villa Selvi and she intended to do so still.

Another day she said:

"Anna, I think we had better write to the agents in Genoa to say you wish to let the Villa Caterina for the winter. You won't want it after the first of November. Furnished houses let very well along this coast in the winter—English people are coming in greater numbers every year. But you must be sure to say that you require careful tenants with unexceptionable references."

"But I'm not sure that I want to let it. I've never thought of it," said Anna. "I might want to go there sometimes."

"When you are married this will be your home. And it's waste of money to leave such a house empty."

"I'm sure though I should want to go down and sit in the garden sometimes," said Anna. The idea was, she did not quite know why, extremely repellent to her. "Besides, I don't know what Gay would do if I were to let it. She'd have no place to go to, would she?"

"But my dear child, you aren't going to let Miss Lawton stop there after you're married? You must tell her frankly that you don't want her services any more, and that she must look out for a new post."

"I want her to live there, just for the present," said Anna. "She's gone through a great deal and I'm afraid she's not happy. I think it would be cruel to turn her out."

"You are too young, darling Anna, to realize the value of money. The rent of the villa would make a charming addition to your little income."

But on this point, Anna was less ready to give way. The letter to the agents in Genoa was not written, and for the moment the matter was in abeyance.

But Anna did not as a rule give any hint of hidden obstinacy. She agreed very prettily and with no show of opposition to nearly all the countess's arrangements and suggestions. Even to that dreadful one about October. . . .

Nevertheless the countess wished sometimes that the girl would show herself slightly more aware of the immense honor that was being conferred upon her by this alliance with the ancient and honorable family of the Selvi.

Gay was secretly making plans for her own

future. She realized that Anna wouldn't like to say in so many words: "When I'm married you won't be able to stay here any longer," and it therefore fell to her to form some plan. And here Mrs. Phipps-Moxon showed herself amiably prepared to come to the rescue. She intended to travel all the autumn, and was perhaps going to New York for Christmas, and she intimated that if Gay promised to give her no sort or kind of anxiety she was prepared to take her with her. No salary, but all expenses paid, and pocket-money. She added at the end of the letter: "You seem to have been wonderfully prudent during your stay at Sant' Elena, and I am very glad of it. I am sure you have laid your lesson to heart. By the way, of course you know that Rodney Nugent is to marry May's sister-in-law, Stella Belton, a delightful little creature. The Nugents are delighted. Do they like this engagement of Anna's to young Selvi? I remember him as such a handsome boy and quite a mother's darling. I hope Anna will be firm and not allow her mother-in-law to live with them. It may answer very well with Italians, who are accustomed to that patriarchal manner of living, but I am sure it would be a mistake for anyone as English as Anna Nugent."

Despite the hint that she was prepared to stand no nonsense, Gay greeted this letter from Mrs. Phipps-Moxon with relief and delight. That lady's notions of pocket-money compared very favorably, as Gay knew, with most people's conceptions of an adequate salary. She was very rich, very generous, and in her own way was fond of Gay Lawton. Of course she had behaved most foolishly about Rodney Nugent, but Mrs. Phipps-Moxon felt that the lesson wouldn't eventually be wasted upon anyone so astutely intelligent as Gay.

Gay read passages of this letter aloud to Anna.

"Oh, I thought perhaps you might have cared to stay on here, Gay," said Anna.

"That's very kind of you, but it wouldn't be possible. I shall enjoy traveling with Mrs. Phipps-Moxon. And you won't want me any more when you're married."

"You must come and stay with us sometimes," said Anna.

Gay laughed.

"I don't think you'll get the countess to endorse that invitation, my dear," she said good-humoredly. "So I wouldn't try if I were you. By the way, Mrs. Phipps-Moxon wants me to join her in London next month. Won't it be lovely seeing grimy old London again?"

Anna flushed faintly. She had a faint yet passionate longing to accompany Gay. To see London—to see Michael. . . . But she put the thought from her almost as if it had been a wicked one.

"I'm so glad you've got this nice autumn in front of you, Gay. It's been so dull for you here," she said, a little enviously.

The countess, however, received the news of Gay's imminent departure with some perturbation. It was impossible, she declared, for Anna, to live quite alone at the Villa Caterina. A girl of nineteen! What would people say?

"But I'm not alone, dear countess. I've got old Francesca, and Settimia and Italo, and then there's the gardener and his wife."

The countess looked at her as if trying to ascertain whether this ingenuousness could really be authentic or was only part of a tiresome perversity such as Anna sometimes, but very rarely, displayed.

"My dear, servants don't count. And you engaged to Benny!"

Anna very nearly said it wasn't her fault that she

was engaged to Benny or that Gay was going away. But any hint of flippancy was distasteful to the countess, who had been born without the smallest sense of humor.

"I shall be all right," she said cheerfully. The prospect of being quite alone for a little while was decidedly agreeable, for she knew that after October she would never probably be alone again.

In the end, however, Mrs. Phipps-Moxon wrote to say that her plans were changed and that she had deferred starting on her travels. She was going to pay visits in Scotland for about two months and she couldn't take Gay with her.

What she failed to mention was that Mrs. Nugent had earnestly appealed to her not to ask Gay to come to London before Rodney was safely married.

"You really never know with a girl of that sort," she had hinted cryptically.

## CHAPTER XIV

### CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON

#### I

MRS. NUGENT held out her hand dreamily to Michael and said:

"So you've come back, darling Michael. Why, you're quite brown! And how is dear little Anna?"

The Nugents were to remain in London during August that year, because it had been arranged that Rodney's marriage to Stella should take place there about the middle of the month. The coming wedding was almost the only topic of conversation at the big house in Lancaster Gate.

Mrs. Nugent with one of her periodic emergences from a state of almost chronic coma, was perpetually in consultation with the Wendles about plans and arrangements.

Now, seeing Michael again after an absence that had lasted nearly seven weeks, she seemed to perceive a change in him. Always she had found it difficult to believe that this cold, self-contained man was her son, and now she found her difficulty increased. It was so much easier to regard May and Rodney as her own children—they had developed so exactly upon expected lines. But Michael, although her first-born, seemed so different. She felt she ought to have loved him most just because he was her first-born. Many women had told her that the first child, especially when a son, was somehow dearer. But then Michael bore no earthly resemblance to the dear little baby

she had secretly thought so strange and ugly, despite the nurses' asseverations to the contrary. Even when he was a boy she had felt a little afraid of him on account of his relentless accuracy, his cold scrutiny. So grave and industrious and critical . . . so unlike her darling, bright, pleasure-loving, mischievous Rodney. . . .

"Anna is very well," replied Michael. "She is engaged to Benedetto Selvi. I remember your saying that would very probably happen. I must congratulate you upon your prophetic instinct."

He sat down in an arm-chair near the open window. The summer evening was close and airless. He found the London rooms too thickly carpeted, too elaborately furnished, after the superior spaciousness and emptiness of Italian ones.

He made the announcement in a very careful mechanical voice as if it were a piece of unimportant news concerning a remote stranger.

"Selvi is a charming Anglo-Italian youth," he added.

"Oh—Selvi, yes. I remember his mother quite well—rather a gushing person—she used to know Temple. I think I saw the boy too, but of course he must have been very young. Dear little Anna—she'll be quite an Italian now. How funny that seems. I hope he is well off!"

"Oh, yes, quite. They have a charming villa," said Michael.

Mrs. Nugent was not nearly so absent-minded at that moment as she appeared to be. She was thinking: "I wonder if Michael minds. When I heard that he'd become a Catholic I was afraid that Anna——"

"And so you've really become a Roman Catholic, Michael?" she said, permitting as much as she dared of this train of thought to escape her in words. "I

hope you are quite satisfied? I was so afraid that you might regret such a rash step."

"I shall never regret it," said Michael, emphatically.

"I suppose you will want to marry a Catholic now? One of Lady Pennington's girls might do—you remember them—the younger is quite pretty. Dark with blue eyes—rather your own coloring! There isn't much money, but Catholics are more austerely brought up than other people, I've often noticed—they seem to require less."

"Thank you," said Michael, "I have no intention of marrying Miss Pennington."

"And about Miss Lawton, Michael? We mustn't forget that she was the original object of your journey. I hope you had no difficulty with her, and that you were able to make things quite clear to her? Rodney is to be married soon, and we don't want to have any fuss of that kind. It would upset poor little Stella so dreadfully."

"You need not be afraid. There will be no fuss made. Miss Lawton understands the situation perfectly. She's a charming girl, very clever and capable. I felt sorry for her, the thing had been going on for so many years. But she bore it very pluckily."

"Catholic girls ought not to want to marry people's rich Protestant sons," objected Mrs. Nugent. "I disapprove of these mixed marriages with all their tiresome restrictions. And then people say the Pope has no authority in England. He *has* authority, and our business is to recognize it and try to circumvent it!"

Michael laughed. His mother's ingenuousness always amused him, chiefly because he was never in the least deluded by it.

"Anna will have a good Catholic husband," he said. "The Selvis are very pious."

"How fortunate for Anna. She'll have everything she likes—a permanent home in Italy—an Italian husband. Has she improved at all?"

"I don't think I found her changed," he said dryly. "But then you know I always thought her very charming-looking."

"Did you? I never remember your saying so. May always said she had no style—so immature and unformed. I used to be so afraid you would fall in love with her yourself, Michael. You always befriended the poor little thing. And when I heard you'd actually become a Catholic I must own to you that I was a little frightened. You'll think me a foolish old woman. . . ."

He was not deceived by this ingenuous artlessness. He had known quite well what was in his mother's mind when she had despatched Anna off so summarily to Sant' Elena, having first manevred him out of the house.

"My becoming a Catholic was the result of conviction. It had nothing to do with Anna, except that I first began to learn about the Church from accompanying her when she was a child to Mass."

"I wish you hadn't been in such a hurry. I wish you could have come home first and talked it over with us, and consulted dear Mr. Tomlinson-Smith. He knows all the arguments against Rome and the Pope. I can't be bothered to remember them all, but they are most convincing, I assure you. Was it quite a sudden idea of yours, Michael?"

"I can't say that it was. I've felt for a long time there was a good deal to be said for a Church that has gone on for nearly two thousand years."

Fresh vistas of alarm had opened before Mrs. Nugent's dreamy gaze. She was thinking: "If it isn't Anna, perhaps it's Gay! It would be so like

her to try to catch Michael, when she couldn't have Rodney. Such a clever, pretty, *wicked* girl. . . ."

Michael smiled a little bitterly. In the midst of the irremediable shipwreck that had ruined his life in so far as its phase of temporal happiness was concerned, he could still count his gain. Whatever Anna had deprived him of, she had at least been the human instrument through which he had attained to this spiritual gift. Day by day he was realizing more clearly and exactly what it meant to him, what it stood for, this one permanent and unalterable thing in a world full of such cruel change. By reading, studying, and above all by praying, he had finally by a slow and difficult but very thorough process arrived step by step at complete conviction. The warm atmosphere of faith that had surrounded him everywhere in Italy had contributed not a little to that final accomplishment. It had pressed home to him the urgent need of participating intimately with that which, as a spectator, he had for so long loved, revered and admired. The smallness of Anna's part in the ultimate phases of his conversion had always been a source of secret surprise to him. And he had scarcely known anything of the sharp final struggle which usually harasses the convert towards the end of that spiritual journey. What he had felt of resistance had only astonished him by its weakness and futility.

"Now tell me more about Miss Lawton," murmured Mrs. Nugent.

"There's very little to tell you. She bore it, as I say, uncommonly well, though naturally it bowled her over a bit at first. I can't think what'll become of her when Anna marries. You see, Selvi doesn't care for her—I fancy they must have had some sort of squabble at one time or another, so there'd be no question of her staying on with Anna."

"Oh, Miss Lawton is perfectly qualified to look after herself. She must be seven or eight and twenty now. And when I think she might at this moment have been my darling Rodney's wife! But it doesn't bear thinking of." She clasped her hands in a kind of exaggerated dismay. "Do you consider her pretty, Michael?"

He was getting there now, and it amused him to tease her.

"Very pretty indeed. And she's a capital companion. She rows and swims like a boy."

"And I suppose you saw quite a good deal of her, since dear little Anna must have been so taken up with her Selvi?"

"Yes, we saw a great deal of each other. We did some jolly climbs together before the weather got too hot."

Her obvious discomfort provoked him into a slight exaggeration of his enjoyment of these things.

"And are she and dear little Anna happy together?"

"Oh, yes—happy enough. I daresay they have their disagreements sometimes, like most women. Miss Lawton is the stronger character of the two. One would hardly think to see them together that she was in a dependent position."

"Oh, no wonder Selvi doesn't like her if she hectors darling Anna!"

"I don't think I said 'hector,' Mother," remonstrated Michael.

"Well, it amounted to that. I wish you wouldn't catch me up so, Michael. . . . I shouldn't like to think of Anna's being bullied."

"There was really nothing of that kind. I am sorry to have given you such a wrong impression."

"Rodney and Stella are coming in to tea," said Mrs. Nugent, changing the subject. "I can't tell you

how tiresome your father has been about the settlements. And he has always been so generous about money!"

Michael remembered his father's letter in which he had stated that the Wendles had opened their mouths very wide on the subject of settlements. And again a certain cold misgiving seized him. He felt a curious desire to see his father and learn more.

## 2

Tea had just been brought in, when the door opened and Rodney and Stella came into the room. Rodney was thin and rather bronzed from his years in India; he looked almost older than Michael. He had lost something of his youthful and conventional good looks. Gay might scarcely have recognized him had she seen him now.

Stella looked a mere slip of a girl beside him. She was very pretty with her flawless pink and white complexion, her masses of wavy red hair, and her big blue eyes. She was dressed all in white with a suggestion of pale blue in her hat and dress that intensified and emphasized the color of her eyes. Beauty she had, but it was a child's beauty, Michael thought, rather than a woman's. Her brilliant hair was very effective, and gave one the idea of imprisoned sunshine. But always when he saw other women, about whom perhaps the world raved, he would think of Anna's calm loveliness that owed so little to coloring, so much to delicacy and perfection of line, and he felt that no one else could compare with her. Yet he acknowledged, too, that the unobservant might so easily pass her by altogether, there was nothing vivid or arresting about her. And his old smile came back to him—she was like a tranquil landscape seen at dawn. . . .

"Darling Mummie of Rodney!" said Stella, going up to Mrs. Nugent and kissing her with an effusive, almost purring affection.

"Dear children—here's Michael come back. . . ."

Mrs. Nugent adored Stella's ways—the pretty graceful ways of a charming, well-bred kitten. She liked to be called "darling Mummie of Rodney," and to be coaxed and flattered, and purred over.

At the sight of his brother, Rodney looked slightly sheepish. He remembered the initial reason of Michael's holiday, and he felt that he would like to hear all about it and how he had fared. Remembering, too, Gay's tempestuous, passionate personality, he wondered if "old Michael" had been "stung." But no, it wasn't likely. Michael was too steady-going, and then he had never liked girls. Rum idea of his that—to change his religion. Rodney privately considered it a silly sort of thing to do.

"How did you find Anna?" he inquired.

"Very well indeed. She's just got engaged to be married."

"Engaged? Who on earth to?"

"Count Selvi. She's known him all her life practically."

"Young chap?" asked Rodney.

"Yes. About twenty-three."

"Money?"

"Quite enough."

"Oh, I'm so glad. I do *love* to hear of people being engaged," said Stella. "How happy she must be! But she mustn't be married first! I couldn't bear that. Tell her I must be married first."

"Oh, you needn't be afraid; there was no question of her being married immediately," said Michael. His pain was so acute, like a sharp delicate stab attacking a single exposed nerve, that it bewildered and confused him. He contemplated his brother's

success and happiness with a dull envy. This child danced around him with her eager, pretty ways, touching his sleeve or his hand with her little white fingers, lifting worshipping blue eyes to his.

She looked years younger than Anna, though they must be, he thought, pretty much of an age. She looked more like fifteen with her tumbled red-gold hair, her short frocks, her thin figure and tiny feet.

"Darling Mummie of Rodney, I dreamed of you last night!"

"Did you, my dear? How sweet of you! I hope it was a nice dream?"

Mrs. Nugent lent herself to this infantile form of conversation with considerable ability. Michael looked on and wondered. He had to remind himself sometimes that beneath that exterior lethargy his mother concealed a rare degree of astuteness.

"Oh, yes, it was simply a lovely dream! Rodney and I had a fearful quarrel and you took my part: Wasn't that priceless?"

She gave a little gurgle of laughter. Rodney smiled down upon her in a proud, possessive way. He was delighted that she "hit it off" so well with his mother.

"You delicious baby," he said, wondering if Stella would ever grow up.

She was the youngest of a big family; and her sisters were all many years older and had married almost before she was out of the nursery. Her parents, especially her father, adored and spoilt her, and May had followed their example.

"Everyone's so sweet to me," she said, smiling at Michael as if she wanted to draw this grave-looking man into the charmed circle, and elicit some compliment or word of approval from him.

Obscurely she wished to conquer him, for May had told her that he had never been in love but was

cold, misanthropic, immersed in work and business. Lately too he had become a Roman Catholic, and to Stella there was a sort of sinister yet alluring mystery bound up in such an action as that.

"Of course they are," said Michael, kindly. He smiled at her, feeling he would as soon have disappointed a child of a cake as Stella of some expression of flattery. And he liked her childish blue eyes so full of confidence. He could not quite believe in such complete artlessness, but somehow that didn't seem to matter.

"I want everyone to love me," she said, snuggling up to Mrs. Nugent on the broad, soft sofa. Her smile included Rodney, Mrs. Nugent, and especially Michael, who was still an unknown quantity to her. She slipped her hand in Mrs. Nugent's and wondered what Rodney's brother thought of her. Of course she had seen him before, but never in this intimate way.

"We're going to the Italian Lakes for our honeymoon," Stella said presently. "We can't speak a word of Italian, either of us, but Rodney says he's going to shout at them in Hindustani. Won't that be fun? Did you like Italy? It must be so wonderful to have a villa there like Anna. Rodney, when you retire we must buy a villa there too, and live in it for three months every year."

"Oh, we shall both be old fogies by the time I retire," said Rodney.

Stella pouted. "I'm not going to let you remain forever in that horrid old Army. I don't mean to stay all my life in India either, and get all brown and wizened like so many women do. I shall insist upon coming home the very instant I'm bored!"

She leaned back, lifting her china-blue eyes to Rodney.

"I've promised you that you shall do just as you

like about that," he said in his easy, good-natured way. "You shan't stay there a moment longer than you wish to."

"Do you think he'll keep his promise?" she asked, turning to Michael.

"Oh, I'm sure he will, to you!"

"I don't know. He's got such a very firm square chin. Much squarer than yours. Turn round, Rodney. . . ." She let her eyes rest upon the feature in question. "Yes, I'm sure you're dreadfully obstinate. I believe he'll bully me horribly when darling Mummie of Rodney isn't there to take my part."

Rodney laughed. "Of course I shall. You'll have a simply horrible time!"

"That's why I insisted upon having some money of my own," said Stella, calmly. "I said, 'I must have some because then I can leave Rodney whenever I want to.' Mamma pretended to be dreadfully shocked. 'Leave your *husband*, Stella?' You know her funny Victorian way. So I said, 'Didn't you ever want to leave yours? Oh, I suppose you were too well brought up.' People are so funny, aren't they, darling?"

While she recited this little episode it came into Michael's mind to ask himself whether she was really as babyish as she seemed. And he came to the conclusion that she was not.

"Is May coming up for the wedding?"

"But of course she is. Simon and Pamela are going to be my page and bridesmaid. Rodney, I'm so glad you haven't got three or four old sisters who'd want to be my bridesmaids and spoil the look of the whole thing. It was very considerate of you. All the other men who've wanted to marry me have had such heaps and heaps of sisters. How lucky you are only to have May."

"Yes—it's topping to have a sister like May," he agreed.

"Now you mustn't say that—I've forbidden it. I'm ever so jealous of May. I'm always afraid you may like her best. You do like me best, don't you?"

"Yes, I'm certain I like you best," Rodney assured her.

Michael listened, feeling a little baffled. But then, he always found himself comparing other women with Anna, and that was a fatal thing to do. . . .

### 3

Michael felt that he had never envisaged the characteristics of his own home and its inmates so clearly as he did upon his return from that brief absence abroad. He had seldom been away for so long a time since he left Oxford, and it seemed to him that either he or his relations must have changed during the interval.

All through those weeks at the Villa Caterina his thoughts had been so deeply concentrated upon two things—his change of religion and his love for Anna—that he had scarcely had time to glance backward and wonder how things were going on at the office, except just after receiving his father's extraordinarily sympathetic and understanding letter about his conversion.

Looking across the table that first night at dinner, he came rather reluctantly to the conclusion that his father was changed, and indeed almost incredibly so. His hair was more plentifully sprinkled with silver, his face was thinner and very careworn; he had all the appearance of an elderly man with whom things were not going too well. Michael felt certain that he was anxious and troubled, but since everyone else seemed uniformly cheerful and could talk of nothing

but the approaching wedding and the munificence of the presents, he was equally certain that his father had made no confession of worry to anyone present. They were all pursuing their normal worldly ways without reference to him. The extravagance, the *luxe* of the meal, struck Michael with a kind of dismay. There was no hint of retrenchment, rather it seemed there was an increased display of wealth as if for the purpose of dazzling Stella.

Stella sat there, looking enchanting in a sophisticatedly simple dress of silver and pale blue. She and Mrs. Nugent and Rodney were all going to the play that night. Michael was relieved to hear it—he hoped that their absence would secure for him that longed-for interview with his father.

Athelstan talked little during the meal. He seemed depressed and abstracted, and quite unmoved by Stella's ceaseless babble. Michael even wondered whether his depression could be due to illness.

After dinner he followed him into the study.

Athelstan sat in his big armchair, and lit a cigar. Then he said:

"I'm very glad you've come back. Once or twice it was all I could do not to send for you. But you hadn't had any sort of holiday for such ages, and sometimes it did occur to me too that it must give you a lot of pleasure to be with Anna again."

"Yes. I was very glad to see her so well—and happy. Mother's told you of course about her engagement to Count Selvi?"

"Yes—I was rather sorry to hear it. I feel we shall lose her altogether now, just as we lost Temple. Did you meet this Selvi? Did you like him?"

"Oh, yes, he's a nice boy of rather a conventional Italian type—very good-looking and all that—and with a tiresome mother who dotes upon him. But if Anna likes him——"

Yes—there lay the crux of the whole situation. Did Anna like him? Or had she been goaded, pushed, hustled, into the engagement by the combined efforts of Countess Selvi and Gay Lawton? He could not tell, and he felt that Anna would be the last to speak. Having given her promise, she was little likely to retract it, even if she found she had made a mistake. Yet he could never forget the anguish of the look she had bestowed upon him when he told her of his love. It had given him a new hope that all his determination had been unable to quench.

If she had had no love to give him in return, why had she looked at once so startled and so profoundly sorrowful at the mention of his love for her? There had been things that puzzled him—that still puzzled him—about Anna's engagement.

As if he had in some sort been following the trend of his son's thoughts, Athelstan said suddenly:

"I was almost in hopes that you and Anna——. When I heard you'd become a Catholic I was glad to think she was one too. But your mother assures me that there was never anything between you."

"No—there was nothing in the sense you mean. Anna is very young."

He lit a cigarette.

"What do you think of this business of Rodney's?"

Michael shrugged his shoulders. "I hope it's all right," he said nervously.

"Oh, it's all right as far as the young couple are concerned. But Lord Wendle made me stump up, I can tell you. May's wasn't in it." Athelstan's brow was gloomy. "It seems Stella's his favorite child, and he had very different ideas for her."

"Then why on earth——?" said Michael, perplexed and perturbed.

Athelstan looked slightly embarrassed. He gave his son an almost furtive glance. "Your mother was awfully keen, for one thing—and so was May. Rodney too. . . . And of course it's a good marriage for him in a sense, though what he's going to do with that silly little baby-thing I can't imagine. But we shall have to economize somehow, Michael—I know you'll help me all you can. It's difficult to say anything to your mother—she's no idea of figures. It wasn't a very convenient moment for me to plank down such a big sum. It's *stung* us, you know," he added, dropping into latter-day slang.

"Badly?" questioned Michael. "Enough to hurt, I mean?"

Athelstan looked at his son rather blankly. He was thinking: "If he'd only been here I believe he'd have given me courage to say no. But I was alone—I should have had them all about my ears." But aloud he only said: "I know I can talk to you in confidence?"

"Of course you can. I'm Nugent and Son too, you know," Michael reminded him.

Athelstan's face cleared a little. It took away the worried, anxious, hunted look, and gave him a more youthful aspect. The change in him just then was not so horribly apparent.

"Won't you tell me just what's happened?" said Michael, his heart sinking a little at the prospect of such a revelation.

"Happened? Why, what do you mean? What should have happened? But I wasn't so keen as your mother was to pay so dearly for letting Rodney marry that pretty little fool."

"I think you were wrong to give in. It's always better to make a frank statement, and to show people when their demands are exorbitant," said Michael.

His father's "bluff" hadn't deceived him. Every moment he was becoming more acutely and painfully aware that something had happened in which the prosperity and perhaps the honor of the firm were involved.

"They'd never have forgiven me if I'd let anything stop the marriage," said Athelstan.

Michael felt indignant. His father had worked, even slaved throughout his married life, and he had got less out of the fruits of that industry than anyone. Money had always been spent most lavishly in keeping up a standard of wealth and opulence at home, and it had been poured forth with equal prodigality to settle his two younger children in life and to assist them in making ambitious marriages. He had been a cheerful and ungrudging giver. He had no time to spend the money himself; he had never had the leisure to cultivate expensive tastes. There was a tiny modicum of contempt in his wife's attitude towards him, although he had bestowed so much upon her, because he was so little of a society man.

"Anyhow, you shouldn't have let them fleece you," Michael said warmly.

It had never occurred to him that Athelstan had given and spent beyond his means to keep pace with a family whose demands upon his purse grew annually more formidable. Not only had he paid Rodney's debts more than once, but since his daughter's marriage he had advanced a large sum to Chingford. It was a loan, of course, but there had never been a hint of repayment.

"Oh, don't bother about that, Ching-Chang. Dad can wait, and it would be awfully inconvenient to pay it back now," May used to say when the subject was broached.

"I felt Rodney would take it very badly if I refused. It might have put an end to everything."

"Oh, Stella's a spoilt baby. They give her all she cries for," said Michael.

"She mightn't have cried for him without the money," said Athelstan, shrewdly.

Michael's anxiety was not in the least allayed, rather it was stimulated by these disclosures. He didn't, however, wish to force his father's confidence, although he longed to know more. Always he had believed Athelstan to be an immensely rich man; he had an enormous respect, too, for his business capacity and integrity; his confidence in his judgment had been up till now complete and absolute. And it hurt him to feel that that confidence was in any way shaken by their conversation. He knew that he had made an immense fortune, and that his "luck" was regarded in the city as proverbial. But on the other hand, many large fortunes as well as many solid companies had been unstable since the War had devastated Europe. And at home there had been no diminution of expenditure. In fact, it had seemed to Michael that there had been an almost exaggerated display. Mrs. Nugent had throughout her married life adopted the firm attitude that she had never been able to understand money, and this inability seemed to increase in proportion to her notions of what were "absolute necessities." And she understood perfectly well when it was not forthcoming, though these occasions had been as rare as Athelstan could in common honesty make them. He had seldom denied her anything, and to begin to do so now would assuredly disclose the unwelcome intelligence that things were not so smooth as they had always been. And given his wife's ingenuous loquacity, such a disclosure would have been perfectly fatal at this highly critical juncture. How critical it was he hardly dared even tell Michael, though he was certain of his son's support and sympathy.

It was an *impasse*, and Nugent, wise and shrewd in all his financial dealings, had had no wisdom with which to meet it.

"I'm only afraid, Michael, that if you should want to marry I couldn't do anything like for you what I've done for Rodney and May!"

Michael's dark blue eyes were fixed steadily on his father's.

"I haven't any intention of marrying," he said, coldly.

Disappointment and relief were oddly mingled in Athelstan's face.

"I felt if you'd married Anna you wouldn't have made any exorbitant demands!"

They had all, strangely enough, considered the possibility of his marrying Anna. But his father was the only one who had betrayed any disappointment at the news of her engagement to another man.

"We needn't consider that, now Anna is going to marry Selvi," said Michael, coldly. "And in any case I should have made no demands whatever upon you. I have my share in the firm as a partner—that's quite enough for me."

Athelstan's face changed color, and seemed to become a livid yellow. "Oh, I'd forgotten that for the moment," he said uneasily, shifting his glance from his son. Partner in a bankrupt firm—yes, there wouldn't be much to be got out of that! He was genuinely sorry for Michael; he felt that he had been cruelly cheated. It didn't help matters either to remember that his elder son was never likely to reproach him. Of all his three children he was the steadiest, the most reliable, although to his mother he was the least attractive.

"Couldn't we make some change now that there are so few of us left at home?" said Michael. "You and mother could move into a smaller, cheaper house.

Keeping up this one must run away with an awful lot. And I could find some rooms." The thought of an independent life was not disagreeable to him. He could work at his writing; he would have leisure and quiet.

Athelstan made a surprising answer.

"Move into a smaller house? Why, you might as well hang out a red flag at once!" he said dryly. "When anything's going wrong it is a sound business rule to keep up appearances."

Now surely he must have given Michael a significant glimpse of the state of things that reigned secretly in the affairs of Nugent and Son. He longed indeed to confide in him more fully, to unburden his heart of some of its carking anxiety, but something cold and reticent in Michael's face stopped him. Just the odd, withdrawn look he had had just now, when the possibility of his marrying Anna had been mentioned. And then the father and son were not on very intimate terms. Athelstan had never had the time to occupy himself personally with his three children; he had left all that to his wife, who in her turn had relegated the responsibility to qualified persons. When they were little Athelstan had seldom seen them except on their best behavior at meals, and their best behavior had always been so remarkably good that he had never felt any anxiety about them. He had indulged May a little on account of her beauty, and Rodney because of his swiftness to grasp things. Michael had always seemed older, more apart, a strange thoughtful child whom his nurses called "stubborn."

"Appearances?" echoed Michael, at last, catching at this significant word. "Is it so necessary to keep them up?"

"Absolutely necessary. But after the wedding we can go into things."

"You mean—it'll have to come then?"

Athelstan laughed bitterly—a harsh, unmirthful sound.

"If not the deluge, at least a very efficient imitation of it."

## 4

In the silence that followed this reckless and revealing speech, Michael's heart gave one quick throb and then seemed to stop beating. It could only compare with that moment he had managed to live through somehow without exclamation of pain, when Anna had informed him of her engagement to Selvi. And even in that bitter moment he had been able to clutch at and seize a forlorn and faintly adumbrated hope that had strangely sustained him. But here of hope there was surely none. His father would not speak like that without very good cause. It must mean that "Nugent's" was rocking to its foundations, and that its collapse was inevitable, perhaps imminent.

Michael had always been so accustomed to the luxurious ease, the opulent atmosphere of his home, that it was difficult for him to believe all at once in this financial crisis that now threatened not only its security but its very existence. And amid his speechless dismay, as little by little realization was forced upon him, another feeling arose to confront him. It was a sense of fear. Would others be involved? He thought of the dreadful criminal proceedings which had of late years frequently followed upon notorious crashes, and which once-wealthy financiers had been called upon to face. From wealth and ease and luxury they had in more than one famous instance vanished into the obscurity, the shame, of a convict's cell. These erstwhile masters of men had had to bend their necks to a severe and harsh discipline,

to submit to a life of labor and hardship, of coarse food and rough attire, shorn utterly of all the amenities to which they had been accustomed.

"Dad," he said in a choking voice, "you don't mean——?" But he could not put his fear into words. It wasn't possible. He had never doubted his father's integrity; he could not begin to doubt it now.

"It'll hit us. No one else," said Athelstan, as if answering the question his son had hesitated to pronounce. "I'm most awfully sorry for you, Michael. We shall carry on for a few months of course, and we might even have a stroke of luck that would stave off disaster. But I wouldn't give much for your partnership."

"Oh, don't worry about that, Dad," said Michael, immensely relieved.

His imagination had run riot, and had shown him the worst. He felt that if he himself were to be the principal sufferer the whole thing would be easier to bear. Pecuniary loss seemed to him trifling in comparison with the loss of Anna. And then for the first time he was almost able to feel thankful that she was going to marry Selvi—that he hadn't unconsciously offered her to share his own ruined life.

He put out his hand and grasped his father's. That firm, resolute touch gave Athelstan a sense of moral and physical support that was of infinite consolation to him at that moment. He had always felt that he could depend upon Michael, and that there existed within this son of his unsuspected reserves of fortitude and endurance.

"Dad, I'll work like anything. . . . I've been an idle beggar up till now. But you'll see. . . ."

"You mustn't think it's all my fault," said Athelstan. "When I took over after Patton's death I was horrified to see what had been going on. I can't

tell you all that to-night—you shall have a look at some of his transactions later. He never said a word to me about them, and I knew nothing till after his death. You know I'd always trusted Patton as I should have trusted my own father."

"Patton!" said Michael, aghast. He too had been brought up on the theory that "Patton," head of Nugent and Son for so many years, could do no wrong. "You don't mean he's let us down?"

"Yes: But you mustn't let your mother suspect that anything's wrong. This final splash, you know!" His voice shook a little, and for the first time that evening he showed signs of breaking down. "We must hurry it on if we can. The Wendles have been trying to get it postponed till October—there'd be a risk about that. . . ."

"But if they give Stella everything she cries for?"

"Well, it seems she isn't exactly crying to be married at once. Just now she's all for waiting."

They heard voices in the hall. Mrs. Nugent had returned from the theatre with her son and Stella. Michael opened the study door just in time to hear Stella say petulantly:

"Darling Mummie of Rodney, promise me you won't let me be hurried! I do so love being engaged, and I'm sure Rodney won't be half so nice when we're married. It's ridiculous of him to want to have the wedding in August!"

Athelstan glanced significantly at Michael as much as to say:

"You see the sort of thing I'm up against!"

"Darling Stella! But really. . . ." Mrs. Nugent's voice was unusually emphatic with its note of gentle protest.

"Rodney says he won't wait—that he'll never feel sure of me till I'm his wife. I believe he means to keep me under lock and key."

Stella came a little nearer to Michael as she spoke, and now she raised her blue eyes appealingly to his. She was like a child determined to attract the attention and win the approbation of a particular person, and she had the feeling that Michael had escaped enchantment. Rodney's own brother too! . . . She wanted him to like her. Everyone liked her. She put a ridiculously tiny hand upon his sleeve.

Michael smiled down upon her indulgently.

"Well, you mustn't wear out poor old Rodney with waiting, you know, Stella. That wouldn't be fair."

They all, for different reasons, looked gratefully at Michael.

## CHAPTER XV

### FAILURE

#### I

IT was settled that the original date fixed for the ceremony should not be changed, although Stella declared her dislike to an August wedding when so many people would be out of town, and only a few old bores who never missed a "smart" wedding would be likely to come up for it. Lord and Lady Wandle were inclined to support her view, simply because it was their habit to give in to her, and they were in no hurry to part from their idolized daughter.

There were endless discussions, and though only mere echoes of them reached Michael's ears he felt bored and exasperated. It was a relief to know that the sixteenth of August was finally fixed.

Stella cried and pouted and said she couldn't be ready. Nearly every morning she would come round and say: "Darling Mummie of Rodney, you've got the horridest son in the world. I do hate him! I can't think why I ever got engaged to him, can you?" This little by-play gave her the liveliest satisfaction since Rodney was generally in the room, listening incredulously.

Mrs. Nugent would kiss and comfort her, and then going out of the room, leave them together despite Stella's protests.

"You two silly babies!" she used to say, as she departed.

Michael was absorbed in work. He went through the accounts and was horrified at the deficit. Yet there might have been some hope if only Athelstan hadn't weakly given in about the settlements. Surely a frank, manly statement to Rodney would have remedied everything.

There had been folly, too, as he was not slow to see, going through those formidable books. Reckless speculation as well as reckless expenditure.

"Oh, how could you have touched those mines, Dad?" he said once in an exasperated tone.

"Don't blame me, Michael," Athelstan said; "it's bad enough as it is. I don't know how we shall tide over these next few months."

He had a hunted, furtive look, and started violently when he heard any sudden, unexpected sound. He avoided people—even Stella. His interest in the wedding was manifestly forced. He still clung to the pathetic belief in keeping up appearances till they could be kept up no longer.

They all went to the wedding, and despite Stella's gloomy prognostications the church was crowded. May was resplendent in a gold dress, her two children attending as page and bridesmaid. Chingford gave the bride away, because at the last moment Lord Wendle professed his inability to do anything so painful. This decision upset Stella very much indeed. Chingford would, she alleged, take her up the aisle as if he were running a race, and she knew that she should hate Rodney when she got there. But when the day came she looked singularly calm and composed, despite her extremely childish appearance. With her short white chiffon dress and simple wreath of orange-blossoms and white heather; and a total absence of jewelry, she seemed to emphasize and exaggerate her own youth. She refused even to wear the very beautiful pearl necklace Rodney had

given her. During the ceremony her big blue eyes sought his face with a kind of resentful admiration. It was absurd to get married after only a few weeks' engagement.

No one could possibly have guessed that anything was amiss with these "enormously rich Nugents." Michael, looking round at the wonderful display of presents, the plate and jewelry, could hardly believe that the waters of the flood were even now waiting to engulf the firm. When he did think of it, however, it seemed to him that the flood was already trickling in through unseen interstices, quietly gathering strength for a great roar as of many waters, overwhelming them all except Rodney and Stella, who would be safely beyond its menace.

It was only when the ceremony was over, that he remembered Anna hadn't even been invited to it. She might not have come, of course, but still he felt that she ought to have been asked. Now it was too late, he liked to think that if she had been invited she would certainly have come, just to have this last glimpse of them all before her own marriage.

Mrs. Nugent went down to stay in Devonshire with her daughter almost immediately after the ceremony. She said she was badly in need of a complete change. This visit was an annual affair and was strictly limited to a fortnight, during which Mrs. Nugent always made pathetic, futile attempts to get on friendly terms with her small grandchildren. But as the presents she brought for them were soon smashed and forgotten, and May forbade her to give them sweets, she felt that her means of approach were limited, the children being strange, self-absorbed, little creatures who only cared passionately for their mother.

Perhaps it would be different, she thought, if Stella ever had children, for in that case she would not

always be able to keep them with her in India, and Mrs. Nugent felt sure that the Wendles, who were growing old, wouldn't want to be bothered with them either. What more probable than that they should be consigned to her care? It seemed so unnatural that she should have nothing at all to say in the education and upbringing of her grandchildren. But these modern young mothers with highly-trained efficient nurses despised all old-fashioned methods, and would listen to no advice proceeding from a grandmotherly source.

Still the house was very comfortable and the garden deliciously shady in this August weather, and both offered almost unrivaled opportunities for that complete indolence which Mrs. Nugent loved. She soon forgot her grievances about the children, and fell into an almost comatose lethargy that was especially soothing after her recent heroic exertions in connection with the wedding.

Highly-colored picture post-cards reached them from the Italian Lakes, whither Rodney and Stella had gone for the honeymoon. These necessarily brief communications gave but little news of the absent couple. Occasionally Stella would write: "This is an awful hole. Rodney hates it, too, and says it's hotter than India. I'm glad I had those chiffon-georgette frocks, they are very useful here." And Rodney, with an equal lack of imagination, would add: "We both hate it here but we're too happy for words. Give my love to Ching-Chang." The village post-mistress enjoyed but secretly shook her head over these laconic, semi-public missives. She felt it wasn't the right spirit in which to treat such a very serious matter as a honeymoon.

But though they evoked these private strictures from the post-mistress, Mrs. Nugent could find no fault with the brief missives. She felt that they

entitled her to write in the following strain to her husband: "We have heard from Rodney and Stella; the dear things are ideally happy." Possibly the one interpretation was as sound and true as the other. But Athelstan, steeped in work which could have but the one result, cared very little whether his son were happy or not. He was dreading the day when he should have to make confession to his wife.

## 2

Since leaving Sant' Elena Michael had received no letter from Father Denham, who had been removed some weeks previously to a nursing home in Genoa, there to receive surgical treatment. He had written to him, and had even written to the matron of the home asking for news, but none had come. He was therefore agreeably surprised when a few weeks after Rodney's wedding he received a letter in Father Denham's shaky writing.

"I had a visit, not long ago," the priest wrote, "from Countess Selvi and your cousin, Miss Nugent. I was astonished of course to hear of the engagement, and perhaps you will not be offended if I say I had hoped for a very different fate for her. She looked ill, I thought, and not very happy. I am told Miss Lawton is leaving her quite soon. There was some talk of the marriage taking place this October, the countess told me, but her brother in New York died suddenly and Benedetto has had to make an immediate journey thither. Report says he is the heir to a very large fortune, but I cannot tell you if this is the case. Miss Nugent informed me it was unlikely now that she would be married till after Easter. I am better, and humanly speaking have earned a reprieve of a few months, so am to

be sent to London. You must come and see me. I was glad to get your letters, to hear news of you. God bless you."

But it was no use now to offer him this gleam of hope derived from the postponement of the marriage. Michael reflected bitterly that everything had been for the best as far as Anna was concerned. He was no longer in a position to marry, and to marry on her money alone was, for him, unthinkable. Besides, in the future he might have to become the breadwinner for both his parents. Athelstan showed unmistakable signs of breaking up. He suffered from insomnia, his nerves were in a bad state.

When Michael read the letter a second time, there were things in it that made him anxious. Anna was not looking well. Perhaps Father Denham would tell him more when he came to London. He had known Anna for a long time, and was acquainted, too, with the Selvis. He might even be able to throw further light upon a situation that was becoming obscure.

With this access of fortune to Benedetto, the young couple would be extremely rich. Michael had not heard that Selvi had expectations of the kind; it had never been mentioned to him, and he wondered if Anna had been aware of it. Miss Lawton was leaving her, and she would perhaps spend the whole winter alone at the Villa Caterina. He was rather sorry for that; he was afraid that she might feel lonely.

He suppressed a wish to write to her, ostensibly to give her an account of Rodney's wedding, but in reality with the hope of eliciting some more precise information about herself.

During his wife's absence, Athelstan began secretly to make plans for getting rid of the lease of his house in Lancaster Gate. But he put off from day

to day the unpleasant task of telling her of the impending financial catastrophe.

The crash, when it did come, came very suddenly. It was in October, just when the first of the winter fogs had descended upon the city, impeding the traffic and wrapping all things in one immense acrid curtain. Athelstan was delayed one evening in getting back from the office, and he found his wife alone in the drawing-room when he came in. She had been reading, but the brightly-bound novel had fallen from her hand, and she was gazing indolently, dreamily, into the fire.

The room was not only the picture of comfort, but it gave evidence of wealth and taste. The shining, highly-polished furniture was of a costly antique kind. Mrs. Nugent was fond of "poking about" in old shops, replacing modern or worthless pieces with what was genuine and costly. Those colored prints on the walls had formed part of Athelstan's inheritance from his father; they were worth immense sums now. The carpets were Persian, and did not cover the entire surface of the beautiful parquet floor. Well, everything would have to go, and a big premium could no doubt be secured for the valuable lease of the house with its fittings. Now that the blow had actually come, Athelstan felt almost cheerful about it. Anything was preferable to those long slow months of suspense. He would be a bankrupt of course, but he was sure he could eventually pay ten shillings in the pound, perhaps even a trifle more if they gave him time. His cheery optimism, his unfailing confidence in his own "luck," supported him in the hour when things were at their worst. If he only hadn't got to tell Juliet! . . .

She looked up at him and smiled as he came into the room.

"You're late, Athelstan. And we're dining out. Those tiresome Jones people."

"Oh, we can't go in this fog, it isn't worth risking the car. You must telephone."

Mrs. Nugent rang the bell and gave the order to the footman. Across the silence that followed they could hear the pealing of the telephone bell in the hall.

Athelstan sat down near the fire and took an evening paper from his pocket. Secretly he was gathering courage to tell his wife. But it was difficult to realize here, in this atmosphere of warmth and flower-scented comfort, that his vast fortune was in ruins. Everywhere as he glanced around he saw the long-stalked pink roses, with which his wife loved to decorate the room so that in winter it might present something of the aspect of summer. He had never wondered much about the price, but he could remember now that some of the florists' bills had been exceptionally heavy. Thick silken curtains were drawn across the shuttered windows, so that the baleful fog was completely excluded. The little polished tables all displayed upon their shining surfaces some costly silver or china ornament, some bit of old Chelsea or fine Oriental jar or *tazza* of gold luster. Juliet had never understood money, but she had a keen conception of what money could buy, and she always saw that hers fulfilled its sordid function. She was a materialist, though a fastidious one.

"Michael tells me that Selvi has come into a large fortune through the death of an uncle in the States," she said meditatively. "Isn't that fortunate for little Anna? Somehow I never thought she'd make such a wonderful marriage—she was such a mousey little thing. But perhaps she knew it was coming."

She was glad to think that she had been kind and

generous to Anna, and that they had given her a happy home after Temple's death. Anna was a good little thing; she wasn't likely to forget what she owed them.

Athelstan didn't answer. When he thought of Anna it was always with a definite regret that Michael hadn't married her. He was so convinced that his son really cared for her, and had only accepted that painful, disagreeable mission to Sant' Elena because he intended at the same time to ask her to be his wife. He had been quite prepared to receive a confession of Michael's engagement on his return. And he would have liked it. He was fond of Anna. Still, he was glad to hear of her good fortune, and perhaps for her things had turned out for the best after all. . . .

He looked up from the paper and said laconically: "Dobson has failed."

"Dobson!" she repeated.

"Yes. That young Dobson's played skittles with everything."

He tried to make his voice sound careless, but Mrs. Nugent seemed to detect in it something that was not quite normal. She had her moments of unexpected, undisguised alertness.

"But you've had nothing to do with Dobson's for years," she said, and the sentence held a faint note of interrogation.

"Well, it doesn't do anybody any good when a firm like that smashes up. It's nearly as bad as a bank. It makes the city nervous. It shakes other people's credit." The statements dropped from his lips with a queer mechanical precision.

"Well, anyhow it can't shake *you*," she said confidently.

She gave Athelstan a long, close, searching look, and as she did so she perceived for the first time

the change in him. Sitting there in the carefully shaded light of an electric lamp his hair looked quite gray, and his face was so thin that it had the appearance of having fallen in. His eyes were averted, and as she looked at him his mouth gave a nervous twitch.

"Is anything wrong, Athelstan?" she cried sharply.

"Yes," he said; "I always hoped to carry on for a few months longer, and perhaps something might have turned up trumps in the meantime. Though I've been in low water before, my luck's always held. But now we shall go down with Dobson's." His voice was steady and level. He might have been discussing the affairs of a third person.

She cried out sharply: "I can't believe it. It can't be true. Why, you've always been so rich! And only the other day you settled all that money on Rodney and Stella!"

"Well, that didn't do us any good," he told her with a strange smile.

"Why on earth did you do it then?"

"Did I seem awfully keen about it?"

"No. But I thought, and so did May, that it was because you didn't care particularly for Stella."

"Well, I didn't, if you want to know. But that wasn't my reason. I knew it would only precipitate matters, but it was no good saying anything. There was still hope then, and it never does to let a hint of these things get about prematurely."

"Does Michael know?" she asked dully.

"Yes, I was obliged to tell him when he came home from abroad. If he'd been here I think he would have taken a firm line with old Wendale. However, it's too late to think of that now. We shall have to clear out of this in a few days."

"You don't mean—you can't mean—that you'll have no money at all?" she cried.

"I'm afraid, Juliet, that's what I do mean."

"And you never gave me a hint—you let me go on spending, spending just as usual. I may be a fool about money, but I should have known I had to stop." She looked at him reproachfully.

It would take a little time to teach her to realize the poverty to which she would now be reduced. . . .

She had not grasped it yet. It would have to come upon her little by little, with the gradual elimination of everything that for years had lapped her in an otiose comfort. It was for her he was sorry, not for himself. He had lived a strenuous life, working diligently and industriously, with his brain full of projects, his days full of business. The luxury of his house had hardly affected him. It was his busy city life that had counted.

"It will be a dreadful blow for the Wendles," she said.

"Well, it won't hurt them," said Athelstan, ironically. "They've made their bit out of us." For the life of him he could not repress this touch of acerbity. Unconsciously, but very surely, they had contributed to his ruin.

"You must make Rodney give us back a few hundreds a year," said Mrs. Nugent. "After all, it's our money he's got."

"Stella will have something to say to that," observed Athelstan, who of them all had been least deceived by his daughter-in-law's artlessness.

"I must write May. I must write and tell her at once. She'll be dreadfully put out."

"It's not a comfortable position for any of us. You realize, of course, I'm a bankrupt? The court will sell up everything to help towards paying the debts."

"Debts, Athelstan? I never knew you had any

'debts. I'm sure we have paid our bills regularly every month!"

"I am speaking of the firm's debts."

"They've got nothing to do with us. I'm not going to have my lovely furniture sold, Athelstan. It's no use your thinking about it!"

"Unfortunately it isn't yours. It's mine, and they'll take it. Bound to."

"Then where shall we go? We can't go on living here without the furniture." She looked round the room, and he saw by the expression of her face that she was slowly beginning to realize what the failure of Nugent and Son would mean to her.

"No, we can't go on living here. You must give the servants notice to-morrow. We must clear out and go into cheap lodgings."

"Cheap lodgings! But I've never lived in cheap lodgings, Athelstan, and I'm not going to begin now. What would Rodney and May think of us? We do owe something to them."

Athelstan smiled, a grim little ghost of a smile that twisted his mouth slightly to one side.

"My dear, I'm most frightfully sorry for you. I've done my best—ask Michael if I haven't. I believe if I'd only had a few more months I could have pulled the old ship through. But Dobson's smashing like this has simply knocked us out."

Mrs. Nugent took a frail lace handkerchief from a silk bag that lay on the table near her, and applied it to her eyes.

"You are cruel, Athelstan—you should have warned me. I should never, never have pushed on Rodney's marriage if I'd known it was going to ruin us all like this. If you'd given me just a hint——"

"Ah, that's just what I couldn't do. A hint to anyone at that critical moment. . . ."

"And to think of your being in the Bankruptcy

Court," she sobbed; "I never thought that could happen to us. Such a disgrace—when we'd been so successful. . . ."

"My dear Juliet, let's make the best of it. We've got each other, and two of our children are happily provided for. Michael's taken it most awfully well, considering that he goes down with the ship, poor boy."

"Oh, what a pity he didn't marry Anna!"

"He might have if you hadn't whipped her off abroad as soon as you suspected there was anything between them." Athelstan could not restrain himself from mentioning the fact, for he had always thought there had been something almost cruel in her swift, drastic action.

"They would have had enough to live on. Anna has a little income and the house, and Michael might have found work out there. He could have taught English. Lots of people manage to live in France and Italy by giving English lessons."

"There's no question now of his marrying Anna. She is engaged to a very rich man—she'll have everything she can possibly want."

"I'm glad for darling little Anna's sake. It's so dreadful to be poor—to go bankrupt and sell all one's beautiful furniture."

"Yes, it's pretty awful for you, Juliet. I'm frightfully sorry. I wish it could have been averted."

"I expect if the truth's known you did something very reckless and imprudent. Ching-Chang always said Nugent's was much too much of a one-man show after Mr. Patton's death. He didn't like it, either."

Athelstan colored a little at the disclosure. That Chingford should have criticized him adversely roused within him a deep inward anger. He had done a great deal for his son-in-law, advancing him a large sum of money which had never been repaid.

"Chingford will have to pay up now," said Athelstan. "I haven't had a farthing of interest from him for two years. A touch of the law won't hurt him."

"Dear Athelstan, how vindictive you are! I'm sure he was right, and it would have been much better if you'd had a strong capable partner, who could have brought money into the firm, instead of Michael. You've had too much on your shoulders, and then you never consult anyone. It's often made me anxious, especially after Ching-Chang drew May's attention to it."

It hurt Athelstan to know that his relations had criticized him, at a time, too, when he was giving them substantial help and working up to the collar to keep things going as usual.

"The War hit us," he said. "And Patton died before we'd properly recovered. It was only by giving my close personal attention to everything that I've managed to stave off disaster so long. And I'm afraid a squint at our books wouldn't have encouraged even a fool with capital to come in!"

Mrs. Nugent rose.

"I shall pack up my jewels to-night and leave them at the Bank in the morning," she said. His words had roused her to one of her rare moments of energetic action.

"One moment, Juliet." He stretched out a detaining hand. "I'm afraid you mustn't do that. We shall have to prove they were yours, you know. We can't remove anything."

They stood and faced each other. Then she said very quietly:

"Athelstan, would it help you if I gave them up?"

"I'm afraid either way you'll have to sell them. They'd buy an awful lot of bread-and-butter." And again his mouth gave that odd sideways twitch.

She went up to him and took his hand with a spon-

taneous gesture of affection so rare with her that he nearly broke down.

"Athelstan, I'm very sorry for you. I know how hard you've worked and all you've done for us. But as you say, we've got each other."

She could look back across twenty-nine years of matrimony, could remember his unfailing kindness to her, his eager spontaneous generosity, his dislike of denying her anything that she wanted, either for herself or the children. And in this sudden light that revealed his qualities so clearly, she saw herself as both selfish and supine, a woman who took all and gave as little as possible in return. He owed, as she was dimly aware, something of his ruin to her extravagance, and to the ceaseless demands of his two younger children, yet no murmur of reproach had ever passed his lips. The little gray, insignificant man who had cut no figure in that society into which wealth combined with a pretty, successful daughter had launched her, was at that moment something of the hero he had been in her eyes when she first married him. And looking back across the years, she was obliged to acknowledge that as far as she was concerned, he had left nothing undone.

"I want to thank you now for all you've always done for me, Athelstan," she whispered.

They kissed each other, and then she went softly out of the room. She wondered why she was feeling it all so little. Perhaps it was because the sudden revelation of the disaster had stunned her. But perhaps too it was because in the universal shipwreck Athelstan had been spared to her. She saw now, with an almost bewildering insight, that he was after all the one person who counted for her in all the world.

## 3

"If you ask me," said Gay, "it serves them all jolly well right!"

She and Mrs. Phipps-Moxon were spending a few days at Genoa before sailing for New York, and they had motored over one afternoon to visit Anna at the Villa Caterina.

Anna had received the melancholy news from Michael on the preceding day. Finding herself alone with Gay, as Mrs. Phipps-Moxon had gone up to the Villa Selvi, she told her what had happened.

The autumn wind was moaning with a kind of sustained melancholy in the trees outside, and the sea rushed crisply against the rocks with a regular, monotonous, thudding sound. The Bay was cut across with lines of snow-white foam that were clearly visible in the twilight.

All day the sirocco had been blowing, making the air damp and warm, and bestowing a kind of sickly, restless, feverish feeling upon those who were susceptible to its influence.

"Oh, Gay. . . ." said Anna, reproachfully.

She had not seen Gay for two months, and it was a very prosperous-looking person who now sat in front of her beside the cheerful fire of aromatic olive logs. Daintily clad and daintily shod and enveloped in a thick soft fur coat she presented a very plausible imitation of Mrs. Phipps-Moxon.

Less than ever did Anna understand her, her sharpness, her bitterness, her complete lack of pity. The thought of the terrible misfortunes which had befallen the Nugents, involving Michael in the general ruin, would, she thought, have evoked some expression of compassion even from their enemies.

"I only wish I could have seen May's face when she first heard it!" said Gay, remembering the little

scene long ago in the school room at Lancaster Gate.  
"How did you hear?"

"I had a letter from Michael."

"I suppose it will affect him?"

"Oh, yes, he's quite ruined," said Anna.

She could hardly bear to think of Michael now. She longed to be able to say something to comfort him.

"When do you expect Benny back?" inquired Gay.

"Early in the year, most likely," said Anna.

Selvi had been gone for nearly three months. Business in New York had detained him, and his letters showed that he was fretting to get back to Anna. Anna had learned to live in the present; she accepted the reprieve in a spirit of thankfulness.

Benny had tried in vain to persuade Anna to marry him before he left Italy. His mother had joined in those entreaties, but Anna was firm, even obdurate. In the end he went alone, and the winding-up of his uncle's estate having proved unexpectedly complicated, he was still detained in New York. No one in the family had suspected that Countess Selvi's brother had made such a large fortune; he had been gone for many years, and as little had been heard of him he had been regarded as unsatisfactory and something even of a rolling stone. Nor had there been any particular reason why he should have made Benny his heir in preference to his other nephews and nieces. However, it now transpired that he had become a Catholic shortly before his death and had wished to leave the bulk of his money in Catholic hands.

All those months, Anna had been trying to love Benny and had failed. Absence, it is said, tends to make the heart grow fonder, but Benny's absence produced within her only a sensation of profound relief. It wasn't, she used to tell herself, that she

didn't like him. It was just that she couldn't bear the thought of having him eternally there. That was why she dreaded to hear that the date of his return had been fixed. He wouldn't be likely to let her keep him waiting much longer when he did come. Sometimes she used to think: "If he'd only fall in love with someone over there!" But he was very faithful and constant, almost painfully so; there was no hope or fear of that. . . .

And just as she had conscientiously tried to love Benny, so had she endeavored to forget Michael. But the one thing seemed as impossible of achievement as the other. It would have been easier perhaps, she sometimes thought, if Michael had never stayed at the Villa Caterina, had never associated himself intimately with her life there. There was no place in the garden that did not touch her memory with some poignant association. And now after months of silence, his letter had taught her how deeply she was affected by the family reverses. Because they touched Michael, they touched her too. It seemed as if she herself were involved in that ruin and shipwreck, and that if Michael suffered she must suffer with him. And strangely, too, she did not wish to stand outside as if it did not concern her. She wanted to share in his adversity. That was why Gay's careless "It serves them all jolly well right" had jarred so upon her.

"So you backed the right horse after all, Anna," said Gay, suddenly. "You were always extraordinarily lucky. There's Michael now without a sou, while Benny's fortune is almost fabulous."

She looked at Anna with something of envy. Even the things she hadn't passionately wanted and hadn't particularly cared about had a knack of turning up trumps and investing themselves with solid material value. How odd of her to look so sad and melan-

choly to-day, just as if the Nugents' reverses were hurting her! . . . Why couldn't she be content with her own immunity from loss, her own prospect of such wonderful gain?

"I wonder you don't go away for a bit, Anna. This place is all right in summer, but it's the deadliest hole in winter. And you're looking frightfully hipped. A change would do you good."

"Oh, I like being here," said Anna. "I don't want to go away."

"Waiting for Benny?" said Gay, satirically. "Well, I'm sure that must be very exhilarating."

She gave her a sharp, piercing glance which confused Anna. No one could have been more remote from her thoughts than Benny was at that moment. She was thinking only of Michael, and Gay's suggestion that she should go away for a change had only set her wondering whether it would be possible to make a journey to London and see the Nugents . . . and Michael.

Benny's long absence had bestowed upon their engagement its final touch of unreality. His letters came regularly, almost by every mail, giving glowing accounts of all he was doing and enjoying. They were written in fluent Italian interpolated by a few words of English and American slang. Yet one little stiff letter from Michael was worth them all.

"When do you sail?" she asked.

"Saturday," replied Gay. "I must say Mrs. Phipps-Moxon has been extraordinarily decent about this trip. She got me no end of clothes in Milan, and she's giving me a good wage besides, although she only calls it pocket-money. I've always liked her, though she does get tiresome and nervous at times. People who want companions always do. Still, I mean to enjoy myself thoroughly, in spite of her."

Anna knew Mrs. Phipps-Moxon very slightly.

She was a War-widow and was little older than Gay. She possessed one of those fortunes which seem fabulous, thus she could give her exactly the kind of life she liked—luxurious traveling, sumptuous hotels, quantities of frocks and furs and hats. The little villa seemed to shrink in comparison, and its homely comfort became a trifle commonplace. Gay was obviously thankful to have emancipated herself from its environment.

"I wonder if we shall find Benny in New York when we get there," she said carelessly.

Anna started. A hope too fantastic to be put into words came into her mind. Once Benny had been, figuratively speaking, at Gay's feet . . . just for a few months. Sometimes Anna had believed that his own feeling for herself had been a quiet, cool, reasonable thing, beside that ephemeral passion he had felt for Gay. But Countess Selvi had fought to rescue her son from the "adventuress" as she called her, and her influence had prevailed. An engaged girl . . . though one wouldn't think it to look at her. Benny had drawn back, disillusioned and discomfited. But Gay had subsequently been restored to a certain measure of favor by her tactful support of his wish to marry Anna. She and Countess Selvi no longer disliked each other. Gay could nearly always make people like her if she chose. After she had left the Villa Caterina the countess had even been heard to speak highly of her as a very sensible, capable person.

It had always seemed to Anna that Benny's love for Gay—if indeed it had ever been love at all—had gone out like a quenched flame. He had subsequently developed an almost unreasonable dislike of her, but who could tell what might happen with another swing of the pendulum? Once she had deceived him, and he had turned to Anna as to some quiet, fragrant

woodland flower blossoming in an innocent obscurity. But when he saw this new Gay, finished, elegant, the spoilt protégée of a rich woman, he might change once more. . . .

Presently Mrs. Phipps-Moxon came in to fetch Gay. It was getting late—they must be making their way back to Genoa.

"Oh, Miss Nugent, I'm so sorry to hear this bad news about your cousins in London! I read it in the *Daily Mail* at Countess Selvi's. She's very much upset about it, too."

"Yes, it's very sad for them all. Michael says it was really owing to the War, and he thinks his father's been splendid to carry on for so long."

Mrs. Phipps-Moxon raised her eyebrows slightly. She had come to a very different conclusion after reading the paragraph which had caused such agitation in the mind of Countess Selvi. But then no doubt Michael would make out as good a case as he could for his father.

"The Wendles, too, will feel it very much," she said, "especially so soon after Lady Stella's marriage. I don't think the firm could have been in any difficulties then, for I remember Lady Wendle telling a friend of mine that the settlements surpassed their wildest expectations."

"They would be sure to see to that," said Gay, bitterly.

"Did you say that Countess Selvi had read about it too?" Anna asked, feeling vaguely uncomfortable.

"Yes. She showed it to me," said Mrs. Phipps-Moxon. "I hope your money is all right, my dear?"

"Oh, yes, it's in very safe things," said Anna.

Gay left them alone together on some pretext of going out to look at the view from the terrace for the last time. When she had gone Mrs. Phipps-Moxon said:

"I hope you don't bear me a grudge for taking your dear friend away? She's a charming girl and I'm so fond of her. But anyhow I suppose she would not have stayed after your marriage?"

"Oh, no," said Anna. "Still I've missed her very much," she felt obliged to add.

"I'm sure you must have. By the way, I think you had better go and see Countess Selvi soon about your cousin's affairs. That notice in the paper has rather upset her. And you, of course, will have heard exact details from Mr. Michael Nugent."

"Michael hasn't told me anything except that the firm's failed, and that his father's a bankrupt. Of course it's dreadful for them. They are absolutely ruined," said Anna, sadly.

"Mrs. Nugent will feel it very much. I always thought hers was one of the most charming houses in London. And it will be a great shock for poor little Lady Stella."

Gay came back into the room. "It's beginning to rain. I think the seaside is horribly melancholy in winter, don't you?" She turned to Mrs. Phipps-Moxon. "It's all right in the summer when one can bathe and boat."

"Oh, Miss Nugent will find a great difference when she gets to Villa Selvi," said Mrs. Phipps-Moxon, with a smile. "One hardly hears the sea at all, and then there's that wonderful garden."

"Don't you think we'd better start? It's such a dark evening," said Gay, helping her on with a sumptuous fur coat.

Already Anna could see that Mrs. Phipps-Moxon was beginning to lean upon Gay. Gay would like that. She was always good-tempered when she fancied herself indispensable and could have things her own way. And it was clear that she meant to have things very much her own way.

But when Gay kissed her good-bye, there was nothing but relief in Anna's heart to feel that this chapter of her life was ended.

She had long ago forgiven her for the part she had played in separating her from Michael, but it had been impossible after that episode to return to the old terms of frank and intimate friendship.

She wondered if Gay would see Benny in New York. . . .

## CHAPTER XVI

### BROKEN OFF

#### I

LADY STELLA was in tears. Sitting on the balcony of a hotel overlooking a lovely autumnal scene of Italian lake and mountain, her blue eyes were dim, and her nose had become pink under the stress of emotion.

It was Rodney's fault, of course—it was always his fault when she cried. He wanted to go home, and she was equally determined to spend the winter at Cannes. And as they were going to that horrible India in February, she did think she might have some say as to where the intervening months were to be spent.

Rodney looked on unmoved. He had been married nearly three months, and he was bound to acknowledge that Stella's tears no longer touched him to remorse as they had once done, nor could they convince him, as they used to do, that he was the most selfish and unfeeling of men.

He did not answer, and at that moment a slight diversion was caused by a knock upon their sitting-room door. A waiter appeared carrying a number of letters and papers, which he handed to Rodney and then withdrew abruptly.

"Anything for me, Rod?" said Stella from the balcony.

"Yes. Here are yours." He went through them

hastily. There was one from May addressed to Stella, and idly he wondered what women could find to write to each other about, with such frequency and at such great length.

He examined his own correspondence. There was a letter from Michael—a thing so unusual as to produce an odd sense of misgiving in his mind. He put the rest aside and opened his brother's letter.

"My dear Rodney: I am sorry to have to write and tell you such awful news, but things in the City have been going from bad to worse lately and we haven't been able to weather the storm. Dobson's failed the other day, and that made matters quite hopeless. I know you will believe father did everything he could to avert the catastrophe. But Nugent and Son have failed, and I'm afraid there's only the bankruptcy court in front of him. We are practically ruined. . . ." There was a good deal more, but this was sufficient for Rodney. He dropped the letter and his face became a ghastly white.

Suddenly there came a little cry from the balcony:

"Oh, Rodney—May's written to tell me that your father's lost all his money and is a bankrupt!" Her wide blue eyes were full of dismay. "Isn't it horrible? Do you think it's really true?"

"Yes. It's quite true. I've just heard from old Michael."

"How perfectly appalling! Does it mean that you won't be so very rich after all?"

It was one of those shrewd, apparently artless speeches which Stella did occasionally fling at her husband to his dismayed surprise.

"Mummy always told me I should be *frightfully* rich if I married you!" she added almost resentfully, as if she had somehow been cheated.

"It won't hurt you, if you mean that," said Rodney, with a note of anger in his voice.

The big blue eyes were raised reproachfully to his. "Cross?" she asked.

Rodney couldn't bear that. She wasn't quite such a baby as she looked, but it was much safer to treat her as one. He kissed her and said: "No, I'm not cross, you darling child. But this is rather a knock-out blow."

She wasn't made for rough weather, and he must help her through this storm.

All the time he was realizing that his father must have made a final immense sacrifice for him, in order to enable him to marry Stella. Of course he had had no idea that there was anything wrong with "Nugent's." When he had first returned from India his mother had been flinging money about just as usual, buying every foolish expensive novelty that took her fancy, and perhaps never using it or looking at it again. "Oh, that absurd old thing!" she would say a month later. He found a likeness now between her and Stella. And how had his mother borne it when forced for the first time to envisage her own penniless condition? But it was his father's fault—he should have had the courage to tell her the truth, to warn her that they were riding for a fall.

And then the sight of Stella's beautiful little tear-stained face taught him how difficult, nay how impossible, it was for a man to make a disagreeable revelation of the kind. Men were cowards, he realized bitterly, before their wives. They ruined themselves in pleasing them, in keeping the truth sedulously from them. Why, he'd no more dare tell Stella if anything were wrong, unless, as now, disclosure was inevitable! . . . He knew the procedure so well if he attempted even in minor things to "put his foot down." She would cry—he couldn't bear to see her cry—and threaten to return to her mother. And he could imagine Lady Wendle sternly and cen-

soriously intimating that he was a brute to torment his little bride. They would all condemn his rough masculine methods.

"Well, it's much better it should hurt them and not us," said Stella presently, regaining her composure as she brought herself to regard this brighter view of their misfortunes. "For after all if it is anyone's fault it's your father's, Rod. And then old people don't need so much money as young ones, they can't want to enjoy themselves in the same way. I always thought your mother was fearfully over-dressed considering her age. Mummie thought so too."

Rodney swallowed this with some difficulty. That "darling Mummie of Rodney" business had completely deceived him.

"But it's horrible having poor relations," continued Stella. "I know, because we've got some, and they're a constant worry to poor Papa, especially when they're ill or are going to have operations. You must promise me not to send any of our money to your people, Rod."

"Well, they've given us a pretty good lot," he said.

"They should have warned us it was going to happen. Papa wouldn't have insisted upon proper settlements then—he would have broken off our engagement in all probability. I never intended to marry into a poor family. And you all seemed so terribly rich!" She sighed.

Rodney's face was so pale and stern that his likeness to Michael was curiously emphasized.

"And would it have made any odds?" he demanded.

"Of course," said Stella. "They all knew I couldn't do without money."

He was aghast at the revelation. Looking back he felt that he had almost been coerced into marrying

Stella. He had fallen in love, not very seriously, perhaps, his feeling for her had had nothing of the young passionate ardor he had felt for Gay Lawton. But there had been May at hand with her cool, "Stella's getting awfully keen about you, Rodney," and then perhaps, "Lady Wendle's rather wondering what you mean to do." And there had also been Mrs. Nugent's gushing, "Stella would make you such a darling loving little wife. . . . She'd help you on too—she's got influential relations everywhere."

"I'm beastly sorry, then," he said, his face stiffening. He did not trust himself to say more than, but went out of the room and shut the door with significant decision. It was hateful to think that his money had counted; he had made so sure that Stella had cared. He remembered when May had first told him that Stella was keen about him, he had felt as if he had been caught in a trap. But he was very devoted to her now, and her words had sunk sword-pointed into his heart.

He walked down to the post-office and sent a telegram to Michael saying that he was returning to London immediately. No tears and entreaties, should, he decided, affect this resolution. The tie of blood was stronger than he had supposed, for now his sole thought was to hasten home and associate himself with the misfortunes of "Nugent's"—he, who for so long had shared abundantly in its prosperity.

## 2

Some days after Gay's departure with Mrs. Phipps-Moxon, Anna was sitting writing in the loggia when Countess Selvi was announced. It was a brilliant November morning; all traces of the recent storm had vanished, and there was a delicious autumn quality in the air, cool, vigorous, bracing.

Anna rose and went toward her. It was unusual for the countess to visit her in the morning, and for some days owing to their respective engagements the two ladies had not met. Now Anna could see at once that Countess Selvi was extremely perturbed. Her hat was on a little awry, and she bore all the signs of having dressed carelessly and in a great hurry, and perhaps, too, under some peculiar stress of emotion.

It almost seemed from her manner that she was irritated at finding Anna outwardly so calm and composed. . . . People who had such awful things happening in their family had no *right* to look like that. . . .

The astonishingly early hour at which she had appeared, combined with her pale, distraught, and agitated aspect, convinced Anna that something must be very seriously amiss. And as the countess's whole being was wrapped up in that of her son, it was natural that she should immediately conclude that something untoward had happened to Benny.

"Oh, what's the matter?" cried Anna, quickening her footsteps and taking the countess's hand in her own. "Is it—is it—Benny?"

She led her to a chair. There was something quite filial and tender in her manner. "Do tell me what it is," she murmured coaxingly.

"Thank God, it has nothing to do with Benny, except of course indirectly," said the countess. "At least it hasn't got anything to do with him yet and I trust it never may have. But my dear child, you don't know what's happened? You haven't seen the English papers? You haven't heard from any of your cousins?"

Anna shook her head. She was beginning to feel extremely puzzled. "Do tell me," she said brightly. There was a smile on her face. The smile exasper-

ated the countess more than she would have liked to confess.

"Then you don't know that your uncle—Mr. Athelstan Nugent—has been arrested in connection with the failure of the firm?"

"Arrested?" For the moment Anna could hardly believe that she had heard the word aright. Arrested. . . . Uncle Athelstan? The letter she had received from Michael about a week ago had told her only of financial failure; there had been nothing then to suggest culpability or fraud. Her heart sank, and now her face was paler than Countess Selvi's.

"I can't believe it! It can't be true. There's some mistake," Anna found herself saying.

"Oh, there is no mistake, as you will see when you read the papers! Large sums are unaccounted for, and it seems he must have appropriated them to his own use. It is a terrible thing—and such a disgrace! . . . To think that Benny!—And the same name too——!" She looked at Anna.

Anna was too much stunned to grasp the exact significance of these apparently irrelevant ejaculations. Her only clear thoughts were centered around the personality of Michael. Was he safe, or would he be incriminated with his father? She knew beyond all doubt at that moment that her heart was wholly Michael's to take or break as he chose.

"The disgrace!" cried the countess, bursting into tears. "And to think that my darling Benny——!"

"Benny?" repeated Anna, mystified. "What has Benny——?" For the moment she believed that he must have lost some of his money in that gigantic failure.

"He is engaged to a Nugent," said Countess Selvi, gazing at Anna with pale, misty eyes. She was so distracted that she hardly knew what she was saying,

and Anna, perceiving this, readily exonerated her from all desire to insult her.

Countess Selvi glanced at Anna almost with aversion. Of course it was in no way the girl's fault, but still she was a Nugent, a near relation of this wicked swindler, and she was Benny's fiancée into the bargain. And this man's son had actually visited at her house, and she had formed quite a favorable opinion of him, had even been afraid that he might want to marry Anna himself. It was Gay Lawton who had relieved her of all anxiety by assuring her that there was nothing of the sort between them. What made it all the more trying was the fact that her son was now very differently placed as regards wealth from what he had been when he proposed to Anna. He was certain to be enormously rich in the near future, and might have made a far better marriage. Anna, in the countess's eyes, was no longer good enough for Benny. Her name was stained with dishonor. Soon all England would be ringing with the Nugent trial; there would be photographs of the criminal, his wife and children, in all the papers. She sincerely pitied Lord Chingford and Lady Stella for having respectively married members of Nugent's family. There was no help for it as far as they were concerned, since the marriages had actually taken place. But Benny's marriage hadn't taken place. How glad she was to think that Anna had so firmly refused to marry him before he went to the States. "When you come back," she had said in her quiet determined voice, and the countess hadn't tried after the first to overrule her. She had never cared to have things done too precipitately.

But how passionately she wished at that moment that Michael had married Anna! Why had he stood aside in that supine English fashion and let her darling Benny step in? Fool that she was, she had en-

couraged Benny every inch of the way! At first he hadn't been at all in love with Anna—his mind was still too sore from that abortive miserable affair with Gay.

She knew, too, that if she herself had not opposed it so passionately, Benny would have married Gay. And though one knew hardly anything about her, she had apparently no relations who could be prosecuted for fraud. . . .

"A mother must think of these things," said the countess, almost apologetically, for she saw by the flush that rose to Anna's face that her words had gone home at last. "It is one's duty. We have to think of the future. . . ."

Anna drew herself up. She was to be associated then with the downfall of the Nugents. She felt more pride than shame, and her eyes rested squarely upon the countess's ravaged face.

"Do you want me to give Benny back his freedom? If so, he's welcome to it, and you can write and tell him so!"

She was angry too, with a white-hot anger that made her tremble.

"Oh, Anna dear—you can't possibly mean it? You don't know what you're saying. . . . Such a marriage as it would be for you!" The countess was shedding tears of relief. "How noble of you, my dear child!"

She leaned forward and tried to clasp Anna's hand, but the girl withdrew it coldly. She hardly heard what the countess was saying. She was thinking, "I'm free! I'm free! I can go to Michael. . . ." But aloud she only said in a cool proud tone:

"I do mean it. I quite see how impossible it would be for your son to marry me now." There was a hint of irony in her voice, and her glance was full of a sad, proud contempt.

"I shall never dare tell him. I feel that he'll never forgive me. It'll break his heart, poor darling boy!"

"You must show him how impossible it would be for a Selvi to marry a Nugent," said Anna. She glanced surreptitiously at her watch, and wondered how soon she could start for London. She wished the countess would go away. There were things to be done—one couldn't leave a house and household in five minutes. And she longed urgently to start. The thought of seeing Michael exhilarated her. To go back to him free! Once he had cared for her when she was not free. Would he still care? But she did not allow that thought to trouble her. She was free, and he must know it. She made a little prayer of thanksgiving.

Then she took off the heavy diamond ring that Benedetto had given her, and handed it to his mother.

"You'll make it quite clear to him, won't you?" she said, almost afraid even now that the countess would refuse to take her at her word, until Benny's answer could be received. "He is absolutely free. We are both very differently placed from what we were when we first became engaged. I hope he will marry some other girl far more suited to him than I could ever be."

The countess dried her tears. "Oh, Anna, I can never thank you enough—you've shown a most wonderful spirit of self-sacrifice! I'm so glad too that you are able to see it all so clearly. Even if Benny is unhappy at first he'll live to thank you. And I do hope, darling Anna, that your own little fortune is quite safe?"

"Oh, I expect it is. But that doesn't matter."

Countess Selvi looked at her with a kind of exasperated admiration. How calm she was, how unmoved. She almost envied her that tranquil acceptance of misfortune.

"I hope you'll really find it's all right. Mr. Nugent seems to have been playing at ducks and drakes with other people's money!"

Anna flinched then. "We won't condemn him beforehand," she said sternly. "I'm perfectly certain myself that he's innocent. I know him so well."

But it hurt her to think of all the people who would necessarily be involved—Aunt Juliet, learning for the first time in her indolent pampered life what poverty could mean, robbed of the luxury that had been to her the dearest thing in the world; May, with her haughty pride, her contempt for "paupers"; Rodney and Stella so recently married; Michael. . . . But at the thought of Michael a great wave of pity invaded her whole being like a warm flood, and for the first time her iron self-control threatened to give way. She could see him so clearly, almost as if he had been standing in front of her, tall, with his slightly sharpened features, his grave steady look, his blue eyes that could be so stern and yet so tender, his smile, his smooth dark hair.

"Mrs. Phipps-Moxon told me some days ago that she had heard very unpleasant rumors from a friend on the Stock Exchange," said Countess Selvi, "so I wasn't altogether surprised."

"Oh, did Gay know that too?"

"I don't suppose Mrs. Phipps-Moxon would have kept it to herself. And she's very fond of Miss Lawton."

That was perhaps why Gay had said so vindictively: "If you ask me, it serves them all jolly well right." She hadn't really cared for Michael. She had wanted his money, and having failed to win him,—failing signally and utterly despite all her little plots and plans—she could rejoice now in the misfortunes that had overtaken him and his.

Gay had gone. And Anna was to lose Benny, even

as a friend. It was unlikely that her intimacy with Countess Selvi would continue. She thought of the rats leaving a doomed ship. But nothing of all this could touch or hurt her. She was free—she was going to Michael. Her heart gave a great leap at the thought.

"Well, good-bye, my dear little Anna. And you're in earnest? You really wish me to write to Benny?"

As she spoke she slipped the diamond ring on to her own slim finger. She was surprised and annoyed to find that it was a little tight for her; she had always prided herself on her small hands.

"Yes, I really mean it. I am quite serious."

The countess kissed her.

### 3

When Countess Selvi had gone, Anna went out into the garden. It was rather mournful now, for the strong, recent gales had beaten some of the chrysanthemums to the earth, and it was only in sheltered places that they lifted their stiff handsome heads, and displayed their white and pink and bronze hues. Some clumps of scarlet salvias made a patch of fire along the beds. A few roses were blooming on the terrace—scentless autumn roses, so different from the summer ones.

Anna stooped down and mechanically lifted some of the chrysanthemums that had been so cruelly chastised by the autumn winds, and as she raised them she saw that their cheerful bright shaggy faces were all muddy and spoilt.

Across the Bay the mountains were beautifully colored in softest tones of violet and dull gray-green, while here and there the bronze and gold of a chestnut wood showed its brilliant autumn tints. Dark berries almost ready for plucking clustered on the

brave little olive trees. The sea was gray and silver, and a fleet of white-sailed fishing boats lay motionless in the distance like poised, dreaming butterflies.

Below her, as she stood on the terrace, Anna could hear the lisping, sucking sound of the sea as with a deep hidden swell it surged against the rocky promontory and the steps that were cut out of the tufa cliff.

At first she was aware of no emotion but that deep sense of thankfulness that possessed her, body and soul. She felt oddly, strangely free, just as if fetters had actually been cut from her hands and feet. She told herself that she was no longer engaged to Selvi, that the prospect of his return home need no longer darken the thought of the future for her. He didn't know it yet . . . but he was free. And she felt sure that he would be quite happy to be free. He had his full share of his mother's pride, and he wouldn't like to marry a girl whose near relation had just been arrested on a charge of criminal fraud. It might be that the countess would cable the news to him. She would surely lose no time in telling him that his engagement was broken off. Anna could only hope that she hadn't shown herself indecently relieved at the thought of her own freedom. It was over, quite over, that hateful engagement, and she would never again savor that mingled remorse, humiliation and shame which had been hers ever since she had so rashly, so inexplicably, promised to marry Selvi. . . .

Then her thoughts turned to the terrible calamity that had incidentally contributed to her escape. But she had no wish to detach herself from it, to keep it as it were at a distance, as if the reverses of these cousins could not affect her. They affected her because they so profoundly and intimately affected Michael. . . .

She had learnt the kind of attitude the world

would be likely to adopt toward the principal actors in the tragedy from Countess Selvi and more indirectly from Gay Lawton. Rats and the sinking ship. . . . Her own desire to participate in the shipwreck because Michael was there would only seem to them fantastic, quixotic. Yet to her it was a desire at once authentic and urgent. She wanted to start for London that very night. Michael might no longer wish to marry her—she deserved that for her faithlessness to an ideal—but he would at least welcome her as the little cousin, the friend. . . .

But she must not think of Michael now. It was the thought of him that took away her courage. He, with that fine and delicate sense of honor, must be suffering now so deeply, wounded to the death in his tenderest susceptibilities. . . .

The wind rose a little, shaking the dark boughs of the pines, brushing their lustrous foliage delicately against the colorless sky. The surge of the sea made a deeper and more booming sound. The great headland by Spezia was almost lost to sight in a driving, descending mist that foretold rain. Everything was painted in sweet dim tones, misty grays and purples and dull blues and browns. The November landscape had a melancholy beauty that was all its own, and the scene looked scarcely less lovely than it had done in those gorgeous golden summer days when Michael had stood by her side under the noonday sun, or in those wonderful summer nights, heavily fragrant with the scent of jessamine and tuberose.

“I’m free! I’m quite free! Michael, I’m quite free—” she said aloud. Her joy was almost child-like. She thought the wind must carry that message to him in England. But perhaps it was too late—perhaps he didn’t care. . . .

## 4

When Anna arrived in London toward the close of a late November afternoon the winter dusk had already fallen upon the city. The sky was quite clear, and the streets seemed full of that luminous purple-brown twilight which gives them at certain seasons of the year such an aspect of haunting mystery.

It was many months since she had left London to embark upon that new life, but already she seemed to be divided from those former days, not only by great spaces of time, but by immense changes within herself. The life at Villa Caterina such as she had pictured it had crumbled into ruins. Gay, who was to have been her eternal companion, had left her with an eagerness that she did not try to conceal, and she herself had felt no regret but only relief at her departure. She had been engaged to be married, and the engagement was now at an end. She was as free as when she had left London, and yet she was more strongly fettered. She knew now that the old childish feeling she had had for Michael was a child's love no more. It belonged to life and to eternity. She had learnt its value and proportion during these bitter months of unwilling betrothal to another man.

Anna drove to a convent near the Oratory. Fortunately there was a vacant room, and she climbed the steep flight of narrow London stairs feeling rather tired, and battered by the long journey. She took off her hat, unpacked a few things, washed the grime from her face and lay down to rest. But it was impossible to sleep. Her brain was oddly active, and the crowding thoughts that invaded it were like flocks of restless birds.

It was nearly six o'clock when she rose, dressed herself, put on a dark hat and coat and drove to the address in Chelsea that Michael had given her. The

taxi whirled her there in a few minutes, and she found herself standing beside a tall house close to the Embankment. She was feeling a little confused. The sustained roar of the traffic, that deep hoarse voice of London, never silent, never still, was a little bewildering after the quiet of Sant' Elena, yet she felt that it held a welcoming familiar sound that was not unpleasant.

She paid the driver, and then began slowly to mount the steep flights of uncarpeted stone stairs.

The flat where the Nugents had taken refuge was at the top of the house and was small and rather miserably furnished. Michael had fortunately put by some sums of money from time to time and these were extremely useful to him now. He calculated that with care they might be made to last for some little while. He had an anxious desire that his mother should have everything she needed for her comfort, and it astonished him to find her in the main so indifferent. Adversity had aroused her and forced her to regard only the larger issues. She was completely obsessed by thoughts of the coming trial, and seemed to have no time or wish to dwell upon her own hardships.

Anna knocked and rang, and the door was presently opened by Mrs. Nugent herself.

"Anna!" she cried.

She was more changed by her reverses of fortune than Anna could have believed possible. Her face was thinner and sharper, but her eyes were alert and had completely lost their old lethargic indolent look. She seemed almost an old woman. . . .

"Come in, my dear child," she said.

Anna had not told them she was coming, and it touched her to see Mrs. Nugent's pleasure.

They stood facing each other in the narrow

passage. Anna put her arms round Mrs. Nugent's neck and kissed her.

"Oh, Aunt Juliet, I'm so dreadfully sorry. I felt I must come."

Mrs. Nugent gave her a quick scrutinizing look. She wondered that the Selvis, mother and son, should have approved of this long journey for Anna at such a moment. She had imagined that they would probably try to keep her apart and detached from the unfortunate vicissitudes of her relations. For it wasn't possible they didn't know. Everyone knew. The papers were full of the failure of "Nugent's."

"Your uncle's here. He's out on bail," said Mrs. Nugent simply.

She stated the fact without any palliation, but rather as if she did not quite believe what she was saying. Then she added passionately: "He's innocent—he's innocent! Athelstan may have been a fool, but he was never wicked!"

"Oh, I'm sure of that, Aunt Juliet. It's all some dreadful mistake—everyone who knows him must know that!"

She slipped her hand in her aunt's arm, and they went along the passage to the door at the end. Mrs. Nugent pushed it open, and they found themselves in a small sitting-room which evidently served for dining-room as well.

Athelstan was sitting by the fire. He looked up as his wife and Anna came into the room.

"Why, it's Anna!" he said. His face brightened visibly, and he held out his hand. "Awfully good of you to come, my dear child. Where are you staying?"

"At the convent," said Anna.

He was the more changed of the two. His hair, which had only just begun to go gray when she left

London last year, had now become perfectly white. It gave him an aged look. He was pitifully thin, and his face had a restless, hunted expression.

"I came—" she said hurriedly, "I couldn't bear it —out there alone. You see, Gay had left me."

"Gay? Where's she gone?"

"To New York. She's traveling with Mrs. Phipps-Moxon."

They talked in desultory fashion, their voices low and hushed, almost as if there had been a recent death in the house. Of the two Mrs. Nugent was far the more alert and rational. The shock had obviously unnerved Athelstan. If only—Anna thought, with a sharp pang of pain—he hadn't looked so hopelessly guilty! . . .

"You're not married yet, then, Anna?" said Mrs. Nugent. For the first time she remembered to speak of Anna's engagement to Selvi. "What extraordinary luck for you, his turning out to be so rich."

"No, I'm not married," Anna answered in a low tone. She hadn't the courage to tell them the truth about that yet. She felt at the moment it might give them an added anxiety.

"It's all Patton's doing," broke forth Mrs. Nugent in a tone of irrepressible passion; "he died leaving everything in confusion!"

"Lucky Patton," said Athelstan. His smile was dreadful. Anna saw it with horror.

The little scene possessed something of the intangible horror of a nightmare. It was a relief when the door opened and Michael came into the room.

"Anna!" His face lit up for a second and then became very cold and stern.

Anna rose and went toward him. She held out her hand and felt his hard fingers closing firmly upon it, but she did not dare look up and meet his eyes. Yet in that moment of meeting it seemed to her that all

doubt and difficulty had been swept away. She belonged to Michael. No Benny or Gay could ever come between them again.

"You shouldn't have come," he said sternly. "You should have stayed out there—in the sunshine."

Anna said simply: "I couldn't keep away."

"Isn't it sweet of her to come, so near the time of her wedding too?" said Mrs. Nugent, affectionately.

There was a little pause and then Anna said in a low tone: "I was just going to tell you. . . . I'm not going to be married after all."

Michael's face was set and hard. He did not look at her.

"Not going to be married? Oh, my dear, what are you saying? And it made me so happy to think you were going to marry such a rich man! And just when he'd inherited that immense fortune! It was almost like a fairy tale." Mrs. Nugent's voice was shrilly incredulous.

Anna looked straight in front of her and said:

"I've broken off my engagement."

Michael gave her a quick shrewd glance.

"Oh, Anna darling, and I did so hope you were comfortably settled! And when he was so much richer than we all expected!" Mrs. Nugent began to weep as if this were indeed a culminating calamity.

Michael said coldly: "Anna knows what is best for her own happiness."

His tone was critical, almost hostile, and the look he gave her chilled her. She turned to him and said:

"I've been alone for some weeks at Villa Caterina. Gay has gone to New York with Mrs. Phipps-Moxon."

"How long shall you be in London?"

"Oh, I shall stay some little time, I think."

"Yes, you mustn't go away yet. Not till after the

trial," said Athelstan, grimly. "You might be of some use to your aunt."

It was dreadful to hear him speak like that, as if the result of the trial were a foregone conclusion.

"When it's over," said Anna, with a gallant confidence, "you must both come with me to Sant' Elena. You know I've always longed to show it to you. Promise to come, Uncle Athelstan!"

"I'll come if they'll let me," said Athelstan, in his grim changed voice, and again Anna felt that little thrill of horror.

She glanced at Michael. How could he bear it? But his face was cold and unmoved. She felt that she had come to the end of her own powers of endurance. The hurried journey had chilled and fatigued her, and it was all so much worse here than she had expected. She got up rather quickly, kissed her uncle and aunt, and held out her hand to Michael. He only said: "I'll come with you to the door."

In the passage he put on his coat, took up a hat and stick, and followed her without a word down those interminable flights of chilly stone stairs.

Outside it was dark, and the London sky looked very black above the clustered roofs. A wind blew vigorously from the river.

They walked along the Embankment for a little distance, going eastward, then Michael said:

"Do you want a taxi?"

"No, I'd rather walk."

Silence fell upon them. He seemed so tall walking by her side. Suddenly he laid his hand abruptly on her arm.

"Anna, what on earth made you come? It's awful—it gets more awful every day. And I've thanked God you weren't here!"

"I felt I must come."

"Because of all this?"

"Yes—I couldn't bear to be so far away. I wanted to be with you all. In it." She looked up now into his face, and her eyes were full of a brave courage.

"It's frightfully good of you, but I wish you hadn't. Why, even May hasn't been up—she says it would upset her to come. Rodney came, of course, but Stella wouldn't. She's in an awful rage about it all, and he's miserable because she says she wouldn't have married him if she'd had any suspicion. I hear she's behaving like a little fury. She's down with May now."

Anna walked a little faster. She felt that his calm, disciplined self-control was beginning to collapse.

"Anna, what on earth made you break off your engagement to Selvi?"

The words were out now, and she felt that they had been in his mind all the time.

"His mother almost asked me to."

"Asked you to? Because of all this?"

"Yes. You see—my name's Nugent, too."

"It's incredible! What brutes people are! Even good people."

"Oh, but you mustn't think I minded, Michael. I'd known, you see, for ever so long, from the very beginning in fact, that I'd made a fearful mistake, and I didn't know how to get out of it. I'm *glad*, Michael. . . ."

He received this in amazed and mystified silence. Never, never, so he now reflected, would he be able to *begin* to understand women. Even a simple straightforward girl like Anna. She had torn his heart in two by her engagement to Selvi, and now here she was assuring him she had known from the very beginning that she had made a mistake.

Suddenly, he thought how lonely she must be. How blank her future must seem if she ever envisaged it. Without Selvi—without Gay.

"And Gay to go off like that! Surely she could have got out of her job and remained with you just through the winter!"

"She was glad to go. I felt like a sinking ship!" said Anna, smiling.

"Ah, thank God you don't sink with us," said Michael.

"But I'm a Nugent, too," she whispered.

"You're outside all this, though," he said.

She stopped and looked up into his face.

"I don't *want* to be outside."

Michael stopped too. They were in one of Chelsea's littlest, loneliest streets. By the light of an electric lamp he could see Anna's face, pale but somehow glowing. Her eyes were shining; she looked strangely alive and intensely happy.

He said abruptly: "You *must* be outside. But it was very good of you to come. You'll go and see them again, won't you? I'm not able to be there a great deal myself—I've got a job all day. But I go when I can. It was just a chance my being there tonight. You must cheer them up, Anna."

They walked in silence to the busy Brompton Road with its lights, its stir of traffic, its crowded pavements. The Oratory stood up massive and pale, its dark dome etched purple against the night sky. They could see the Statue of Our Lady leaning forward a little as if she were holding out her arms protectingly over London—this London that once had loved and honored, and now had almost forgotten her.

"Let's go in for a moment," said Anna.

They entered the great church. At the far end the light before the Tabernacle burned and glowed in the warm, incense-laden dusk. They knelt down, and presently as she was praying Anna felt that Michael had risen and left her side and gone quietly away. . . .

## CHAPTER XVII

### COMMITTED FOR TRIAL

#### I

ANNA saw very little of Michael in the sad winter weeks that followed her arrival in London. They were dark wet weeks, the rain and fog alternating with raking blizzards and blinding snow that swept the land. In the country it was beautiful, with the fields and hills garmented in that sparkling white pall that seemed to be guarding cozily and tenderly all the wonderful spring growths that were already beginning to push up tender green spikes through the brown earth. No spring is perhaps ever so sweet, so worth while, as when it follows an ice-bound winter of deep snow and prolonged cold, for then all its sweetness seems to have been honestly earned, and the joy of it comes almost as a reward for the patient, painful waiting. . . .

But in London the snow was soon smudged and stained by passing traffic, and afterwards it lay along the side of the streets in discolored mounds, waiting to be carted away. It retained its pristine whiteness for such a short time, and then it made the city look squalid and almost degraded.

The physical discomfort was great, but Anna scarcely seemed to feel it. She went often, sometimes twice a day, to the little flat in Chelsea, generally seeing only Mrs. Nugent. Quietly she contrived that there should always be coal for the fire during that bitter weather, and she took with her many little luxuries in the way of food, sometimes preparing them

with her own hands as in the past old Francesca had taught her to do. In these ways she felt that she could still be of use, even if—as became daily more apparent—Michael didn't want her there at all. If he came in to find her sitting with his mother, he generally made some excuse for an abrupt inevitable departure. He avoided her, and especially he was careful never to see her alone.

She longed to talk to him. There was so much that she wanted to hear, which he alone could tell her. But his face seemed to be determinedly set against any possibility of a revival of their old intimacy. He was purposely strengthening the barrier between them. Only on that first night of her arrival, his glad momentary surprise at seeing her had taught her that he was not yet wholly indifferent. Otherwise she must have believed that whatever love he had once had for her was dead. It had been wounded almost to the death, as she well knew, the day she had made confession to him of her engagement to Selvi. Perhaps in that bitter moment of disillusionment something of his long love had failed forever. . . .

It was painful to her to meet this cold stranger whose face never brightened at her approach. His manner made a kind of constraint between them, and Anna was enough of a Nugent to feel chilled by it and to fall back upon reserve and reticence. Indeed she only remained in London because Mrs. Nugent so obviously needed her. She made up to her in ever so slight a degree for the defection of May. During the interminable proceedings before the magistrate, ending always in "bail as before," Anna always stayed with Mrs. Nugent, comforting her through those weary anxious hours, until her husband returned with Michael. She was shaken, anxious, often despondent; she seemed to cling to Anna.

The news that they had all been expecting and

dreading came one bitter winter's day when a fierce north-east wind raked the London streets, and the lurid clouds menaced another fall of snow. Anna was there with Mrs. Nugent when Michael came in with his father. She was so much one of the family, had identified herself so completely and deliberately with them in their hour of adversity, that her presence was never considered superfluous. She had a right to be there, but not the full right which only Michael could have given her. This thought recurred to her now with an unusual bitterness.

Athelstan looked blue and half-dead with cold. His sunken eyes had a restless, glittering, feverish look. Physically he was a complete wreck, and he leaned heavily on Michael's arm.

"Oh, Anna's with you! That's right," he said, in a queer, trembling voice that was very unlike his old abrupt, kindly accents.

"I don't know what I should do without her," said Mrs. Nugent.

Michael stood there, his face like a stone mask and nearly as pale. He looked old for his years now; the boy had vanished forever.

"He'd rather I wasn't here," said Anna to herself.

She knew that he was suffering, and felt that her presence increased his pain.

"We're rather late," said Athelstan feebly. "I've been committed for trial. It was rather a long business—the bail—finding sureties . . . such a big sum."

He sank back in his arm-chair by the fire. His wife went over to him and began to chafe his hands. He was submissive, in a dreadful, resigned, almost child-like fashion, inert, apathetic.

Anna saw that Mrs. Nugent's tears were falling thickly. Michael signaled to her to come out of the room.

"Better leave them. You can't do anything," he said as he followed her into the passage, closing the door behind him.

They stood together in the narrow hall, with its staring yellow glazed paper and buff-colored linoleum from which most of the pattern had been worn away.

"You realize of course what this means?" he said.

"Yes."

"Don't you think you'd better go back to Sant' Elena? You can't help, and it'll be an awful time for us all."

"Do you want me to go, Michael?"

"For many reasons, yes. Particularly for your own sake. I hate to think of your being mixed up in anything so squalid. Why should you suffer through us? Look at May, how she keeps out of it! And Stella. . . ."

"They are nothing to me." She lifted her head. "I feel that your mother wants me all the more because May and Stella—both so much nearer to her—keep so resolutely away." Try as she would to keep the bitterness from her voice as she uttered those words, she failed to do so. "And I think she likes having me."

"Of course she does. And it's most awfully good of you to spend so much time with her. It's made all the difference, I know. But we've no right to take it from you. I hate the thought of your sacrificing yourself like this!"

"Don't send me away, Michael," she pleaded. "If those are the only reasons, let me stay. And . . . I want to ask you something. . . ."

"Yes? What is it?" almost impatiently.

"Who is going to defend him? He ought to have the very best. Someone we can rely upon to do all that's humanly possible."

"We wanted to retain Chenevix, but we simply

can't afford big fees, you know—it's out of the question. . . . Rodney can't help—his wife won't hear of it—talks of chucking good money after bad. And May says much the same."

"Then—let me—Michael—" she said breathlessly.

"You?" He looked down at her upturned beautiful little face, but his blue eyes never softened.

"Yes. Let me help. I've got some money—more than I shall ever spend. And I'd rather spend it like that."

She looked up eagerly, but his expression chilled her. For the moment she thought he was bitterly offended at being offered money.

"Do let me . . . Michael. . . ."

"Oh, that's out of the question. We couldn't possibly accept it from you. It's most awfully good of you all the same."

"Michael—you can . . . you must! Don't refuse. . . ."

He brushed his hand abruptly across his eyes.

"But my dear Anna—it would mean thousands. We couldn't in common decency take it from you!"

She moved towards the stairs, and Michael followed her in a kind of stupefied silence. They went down into the street, and the rush of fierce keen wind blew savagely against their faces in greeting. It was so sharp that Anna felt it must almost have flayed her face. People were hurrying past, their faces bent a little, their coat-collars turned up to their ears. Women pulled their furs more tightly about their bare throats.

Anna hated the cold; beneath the blast she wilted like a flower.

"Are you wrapped up enough? Is your coat a thick one?" he asked solicitously.

"Yes—I'm a mass of furs and wraps," she an-

swered. She tried to smile, but the cold froze her lips so that she could hardly move them. Her cheeks felt stiff.

"It's arctic," said Michael. "I'd rather you went back to Italy. You must hate it so here."

"I . . . I couldn't bear to be so far away," she said.

"What do you think of father?"

"He looks very ill to-night."

"It's killing him," said Michael.

"All the more reason why he should have the very best counsel money can buy."

"Oh, Anna—you mustn't speak of that again. . . .

But before they reached the convent she had won her point. She waived aside all his objections one by one. She had even asked his advice about selling some of her securities. He hated it with all his heart, but always he could see before his eyes that little scene of his father's return home to-night. His mother going across to where he was sitting so helplessly, chafing his blue hands in tender maternal fashion, while her tears dropped thickly. . . . It was the first time he had ever within his remembrance seen her cry, and the sight had a little unnerved him. All these weeks he had admired and felt astonished at her wonderful bright courage, and this little breakdown had been all the more terrible and significant. . . .

Yes, he hated the whole business, and almost he hated Anna for suggesting it, but for his father's sake he gave in. Often the thought had tormented him, and he wished he had been more economical in the past so that he could have had the money ready for such an emergency. But the necessity for economy had never occurred to any of the family.

Of course he would pay it back, in time. He

could work. He had immense confidence in his own energy and industry. And if he couldn't get anything adequate to do in England he would emigrate. He was young still—he could start afresh, and work his way up, and in the end pay her back every farthing.

But to owe anything to Anna even for a time seemed to him to be a subtle form of degradation. They oughtn't to take advantage of her simple youthful generosity.

"Anna, I don't know how to thank you. It's no good my trying. But it's simply splendid of you. I hate taking it."

His thoughts were in confusion. Sometimes the conviction that she did love him in spite of all things would intrude like an unwelcome visitor, and he was angry with himself for entertaining it even involuntarily.

They were in the quiet street where the convent was situated, and he stopped abruptly. The great trees in the gardens that faced the houses waved their boughs, like gigantic black arms, wildly in the gale. They tossed violently as if pleading for mercy even while they furiously resisted the onslaught.

"Oh, Anna, don't stay in London," he said; "go back to the Villa. Money—career—honor—we've lost everything. We're bankrupt all round." He turned away from her. It seemed to him that in that moment he tasted the whole bitterness of life. "You're too young—go back to Sant' Elena—forget me. . . ."

"So you really want to send me away?" she said. His passionate words had caused that dying hope in her heart to stir and flutter like a broken-winged bird. She was smiling, but the tears flickered frostily on her long lashes. "You mean to keep me outside, when I've shown you that I don't want to stay there?"

"Oh, my darling Anna, it's too late! I love you as you know, but I'm not going to ask you to marry a ruined and bankrupt man."

"If you loved me, you couldn't send me away," she said, a little amazed at her own daring.

"Are you telling me that you'd be ready to marry me now?" he said.

"Oh, Michael, don't be so slow of understanding!" Beneath the light mockery of her words there was a profound sadness.

"Because it's no use—no use at all, Anna. I couldn't sacrifice you. I should be taking a wicked advantage of your youth and generosity. Don't tempt me . . . don't let us see each other. . . ."

He seemed to tower above her in the cold, windy darkness.

He knew now that Anna loved him, now when it was too late for him to marry her. He couldn't let her make such a marriage—she was not yet twenty—she didn't know what she was doing, nor what it would mean to link her young, fair, happy life with his stained and dishonored one. If the trial went badly—and in his pessimism he believed that it would—he never intended to see her again. But he dared not look into that future of disgrace and shame, as into some deep, untried abyss. Already he seemed to feel its chill darkness upon his face.

"Good-bye, Anna. You've been very sweet—very kind. Forgive me."

She did not answer, and the hand she put into his at parting seemed mortally cold.

She felt herself repulsed—it was like being covered with a garment of hot shame. Convinced that his motive for refusing her love had been inspired by a sincere wish for her own well-being, she still doubted his love. If it had been genuine, surely it would have mocked at such barriers as those. For

in the main she had come to London to see him, to tell him that she was free, and yet he could only urge her insistently to return to Sant' Elena. Perhaps her importunity had only made his present task a little more difficult and repellent. But loving Michael as she did, more deeply and profoundly than ever before, she realized with a despair that was like death, that he was not prepared to admit her to his ruined, broken, dishonored life.

His coldness even in that passionate moment had stunned her. She felt as if he had flung her into the dust. He knew now that she loved him, she had made no secret of it, and he had sent her away. Her heart almost stopped beating with pain. This cold, strange, new Michael didn't love her, didn't want her any more. Grief had frozen him.

## 2

Anna went indoors and up to her room. She lived very penitulously at the convent, spending all she could spare on little comforts for Mrs. Nugent. She seldom allowed herself a fire in her room even in this bitter weather, and to-night it struck her as painfully, almost unbearably cold. The window could not quite keep out that fierce cutting north-easterly gale which had chilled her to the bone during her walk home.

The other boarders, mostly elderly women and all much older than herself, were very kind to her, talking to her at meals, trying to make her feel at home. She felt rather small and forlorn among them all, and she lived in dread too lest someone should mention the Nugent trial, which was on everybody's lips in London just then. But perhaps they suspected she was a relation of the prisoner, since she bore the same name, so they refrained from mentioning the subject in front of her.

Michael was as yet little known in Catholic circles; his conversion was so recent, and he was too busy a man.

After that interview he kept scrupulously out of her way. The date of the trial was fixed, and some of the most eminent counsel in London had been engaged to defend Athelstan. Mrs. Nugent was calm again with a wonderful serenity, as if determined to try to imbue her husband with something of her own courage and confidence. It was not an easy task, for he was utterly shaken, but he would have been far worse, as she knew, if she had shown signs of breaking down.

Anna had believed that Mrs. Nugent would collapse entirely beneath these overwhelming blows of an adverse fate, and it astonished her to see her so calm, even composed. She had splendid qualities, and calamity seemed to draw them to the surface. Sometimes one could see a likeness now between Mrs. Nugent and Michael. When anything went wrong they were like firm pillars of strength and fortitude.

Stella was going to have a baby, Rodney wrote. She was ill, and wretched, and angry with everyone. Rodney had sent in his papers, feeling he could no longer face his old friends in the regiment, and also because Stella had now definitely refused to go to India. She was determined to remain with her mother until the event was over, and Rodney found himself scarcely welcome there. He stayed a great deal with May at Wakebourne, only going occasionally to Somersetshire to see his wife. It was evident that his marriage was a very unhappy one.

Anna was sitting in her room one afternoon when a lay-sister came up to tell her that Countess Selvi was waiting to see her in the parlor. The information astonished her, as she knew that the countess had not been in England for many years, and always

spoke with an especial horror of the English winter. Besides, she could think of no adequate reason that could bring her to see her in the present moment of harassing anxiety. It could not be that she was the bearer of some message from Benny—some intimation that he did not want the freedom Anna had so thankfully handed back to him? . . .

Feeling a little perturbed, she hurried down to the parlor. But on opening the door she saw, instead of Countess Selvi, a tall and very fashionable figure heavily enveloped in costly furs.

"Gay!" she exclaimed, in surprise.

She paused on the threshold. They looked at each other across the dreary little room.

"They told me it was Countess Selvi," said Anna, bewildered.

"Well, I am Countess Selvi!" said Gay.

The change in her, inaugurated when she started upon her travels with Mrs. Phipps-Moxon, now amounted to a positive transformation. With her beautiful clothes, her furs and jewels, her *soigné* polished appearance, she was very different from the Gay of old days who with her careless haphazard methods had produced such charming, unstudied results.

"I don't understand . . .," said Anna. She almost doubted the objectivity of the vision that confronted her.

"You darling old goose, I see you've got your head as much in the clouds as ever! Don't you understand I've married Benny? We met him in New York almost as soon as we got there, frightfully disconsolate at your chucking him—(why on earth did you do it, Anna, when he'd just come into that huge fortune?) Still I managed to show him that it was really a blessing in disguise considering all that had been happening on this side." She said

this with a little edge of malice in her voice. "You can't think what a perfect dear Ellen Phipps-Moxon has been over the whole thing. One does want a little influential help at such times, you know, Anna, and that's what you were never able to give me. And Benny's really been in love with me all along, only that horrible old mother of his made mischief. However, we're on our way to Sant' Elena now to have a reconciliation. She's no choice, because Benny's his own master now, and can do as he chooses."

She leaned back in the high, uncomfortable chair and crossed her feet, displaying fragile silk stockings and tiny dainty shoes.

"Oh, Anna, don't think me a pig and all that, but it *is* lovely having lots of money at last! I suppose I'm a materialist, for I'd rather have it than anything. You're not ambitious, I know; you'll always be quite content to stop at Villa Caterina just carrying on. Still, you were a little fool not to stick to Benny. Michael's ruined, I suppose, so you've fallen between two stools."

"When were you married, Gay?" asked Anna. She had so often heard Gay abuse both mother and son with emphatic eloquence, that it seemed scarcely credible she should actually have married Benny in the end.

The whole reason for that trip to New York seemed to stand out quite clearly.

"Oh, it must be three weeks ago—it seems an awful age. Still I'm very happy. Benny's rather a priceless person when you get him quite away from his mother!"

"Shall you live at the Villa Selvi?"

"My dear child, why on earth should I live in that deadly hole? No, we shall leave it to dear Mamma, and Benny and I have bought a lovely place

at Florence to begin with, and later I think we shall have something in Venice as well. We've really hardly got going yet, you know. But I've put my foot down quite firmly on the subject of the old countess living with us. No joint establishments for me, thank you! You know the Italian idea—all living under one roof and no room to breathe." She laughed. "Congratulate me, Anna. I'm in luck—I've pulled it off this time, haven't I?"

"Indeed you have," said Anna, still confused. "But how did you find me? How did you know I was in London?"

"Oh, Benny heard that from his mother, and I wrote to Villa Caterina for your address. What made you come over here, Anna? Why did you mix yourself up in these horrible, dismal, degrading happenings? Why, even I felt quite ashamed that I'd ever known the Athelstan Nugents, and I pity that miserable little Stella with all my heart."

"I am not at all ashamed—I am only very, very sorry for them all," said Anna, coldly. "That was why I came—to show my sympathy. I am certain that poor Uncle Athelstan is innocent—it will all come out at the trial."

"The trial? Has he been committed for trial, then?" said Gay, suddenly sobered.

"Yes. It's to begin next week."

"But you don't mean to say you're going to stay here for it, when you might have been living quite quietly at Villa Caterina, and hardly anyone would have known you were even connected?"

"I'd rather be here," said Anna, stubbornly. "Michael did want me to go away."

"How's he taking it?"

"He—he is just the same."

"Yes, he was always a cold fish," said Gay. "I used to think he was in love with you, Anna, as

far as he could be in love with anyone, though you always swore he wasn't. However, you'll never be able to marry him now, and I suppose you knew that when you chucked Benny."

"No, I shall never marry him now," said Anna, quietly.

"Isn't it funny to think how things change?" said Gay. "They're poor now, and I'm rich. I, who wasn't good enough for their precious son, am Countess Selvi with a rich husband and every mortal thing I can possibly want! Someone told me that girl he married is leading him an awful dance. And the haughty May—she must feel the family reverses." Gay seemed to take an especial and undisguised delight in this contemplation of the Nugents' discomfiture. She felt she could meet Mrs. Nugent on more than equal terms now, and perhaps cut her and May. . . .

Her point of view, not untouched by a spirit of revenge, was incomprehensible to Anna, who could never be long angry with anyone. As well might she herself bear a grudge against Gay for the part she had deliberately played last summer in separating her from Michael. At the time, it is true, she had felt indignation and anger and a strange hurt helplessness as if someone had bound her cruelly with chains. But that condition of mind had swiftly passed; she had freely forgiven Gay, and could look back upon the episode without bitterness.

Indeed, everything that had happened last summer had become strangely remote and unimportant in comparison to the terrible events that were now pending. She bore her part in that suffering, but always she had the old feeling that she was waiting for Michael, and in this period of anxious incertitude, of fiery probation, she felt that her soul was expanding, learning new lessons of fortitude and patience and

complete confidence. She felt too that she could bear it all, if only in the end Michael came back to her.

"Of course the old countess was frightfully sick about our marriage," continued Gay, whose mind was far more occupied with her own brilliant accession to wealth than with the Nugents' reverses. "I knew she would be, and that was why I got Ellen Phipps-Moxon to persuade Benny to let it take place in New York. It was so difficult to get him to be manly and independent and not think whether his tiresome mother was going to object or not. But now she can cry and rage as much as she likes, she can't undo it, and no one knows that better than she does!"

"I'm glad you're so happy, Gay," said Anna.

"Well, as for that it's not deliriously exciting, you know, but it's the best chance I've ever had, and I shall manage somehow if I can only keep Benny away from his mother for a bit. And I like being *Contessa!* Sounds better than Mrs. Nugent, doesn't it?" She laughed airily. Then rising she came close to Anna and said: "I will say this for you, Anna, you've been jolly decent to me. You gave me a home when I hadn't anywhere to go, and if you hadn't done that I should never have met Benny. I know the countess calls me a climber and a schemer and various other things. It's all very well for people who've always had a roof over their heads and lots to eat to talk like that, but they shouldn't judge those who haven't had the same advantages, so harshly. Now I'm going to make a confession, Anna, because I know you're too much of a saint ever to give me away. I did try to marry Michael last summer—I knew he was in love with you—he as good as told me so—but I got him to believe that you were in love with Benny. And it wasn't only ambition—I did like him, more than I ever liked Rodney. There

was something about him different from other men. I felt I should always be happy with him—yes, and good too. He seemed to expect more of one, somehow. And he hadn't really got charm—he was too stiff and cold and stern for that. I should have married him if he'd asked me, and if I'd been a poor woman with him to-day I don't believe I should have minded." She made the avowal quite simply and seriously. "I'm sorry for all that's happened, when I think of Michael. And if you see him you can tell him so."

"I don't think I shall see him," said Anna. Gay's words were echoing in her ears. Something about him different from other men. . . . So different indeed that only Michael, poor and bankrupt as he was, could ever satisfy Anna's own heart-hunger. . . .

Gay was very grave and serious now, and something of its lost sweetness had come back to her face. She looked almost beautiful with that softened look darkening her eyes.

"Now I must be going or Benny will wonder what's become of me. I told him I was coming to see you." Gay stooped and kissed Anna with something of her old affection.

Anna went with her to the door. The sky was nearly black, and a few faint stars pierced its darkness. The trees in the gardens beyond were almost motionless to-night, and made patches of thick shadow, brown and purple and sombre black.

Gay got into a sumptuous car that was waiting in the road and drove away. She leaned out a little and waved her hand. Anna waved hers in answer. She was glad to have seen her, and it gave her a feeling of happiness that these two friends of hers should have thus come together. There was a certain risk about it, for Gay seemed to have deliberately "married for money"; still she had apparently liked

Benny very much indeed at one time, and there was no reason why he should not revive that old affection in her.

But her visit had made Anna feel restless and unsettled, as if she were waiting for something that would never come.

## 3

As the trial proceeded in those bleak bitter February days, it was noticed by many of those who attended the court daily that the prisoner's health seemed to be failing. No longer did he sit there taking interminable notes, listening eagerly and alertly as he had done at first to the mass of evidence, so full of financial technicalities. He sat there idly now, a little gray man, inert, apathetic and shrunken, whose physique had undergone a visible change for the worse since the commencement of his terrible ordeal.

Michael was always in court. Each day he was allowed to see his father for a few minutes. But they could have no private talk, and the interviews were extremely painful to them both. It was a relief to them to know that Mrs. Nugent was with Anna. She had not been very well, had been suffering from her heart. The doctor told her to avoid all emotion and excitement as much as possible.

Michael had hardly seen Anna of late. But one Sunday night as he was going into the Oratory he met her on the steps, and stopped to speak to her.

"Do you often come here?" he asked.

"Yes—every day. To pray for him . . . so many people are praying for him—nuns and priests. Oh, I'm sure it will come out all right!"

Michael felt less assured. Humanly speaking there seemed to him little hope of things going well,

although the defense undoubtedly grew in strength from day to day, as further details of the late Mr. Patton's transactions were brought to light.

But his faith in the efficacy of prayer was not less than Anna's and the thought of her prayers consoled him. They entered the church together and knelt down side by side.

It was difficult for him now to believe in the reality of those beautiful weeks he had spent last summer at Sant' Elena. They stood out in his remembrance like an illuminated interlude of wonderful sunshine, full of flowers and fragrance, with the wash of water against the cliffs, the light on sky and mountain. . . . Anna there, growing dearer to him every day.

But it only increased his suffering now to have her here in London. He loved her for her beautiful daily attendance on his mother, achieved, as he dimly guessed, at much personal sacrifice. But he would rather have known her in the peace and sunshine of the Villa Caterina. . . .

The music soothed him. As he knelt there he realized more fully than ever before, all that the Church could mean to the sorrowful. Her touch that gave fortitude as well as consolation, strength as well as help. In his great need now he prayed, and something of his black anxiety seemed to fall away.

As they came out he said: "I'm going to see Father Denham. Did you know he was in London?"

"Yes. I saw him last week. He seemed a little better. He's praying for us too, Michael."

He walked as far as the convent with her, not speaking. Then he wrung her hand and walked abruptly away.

It was a long walk to the house where Father Denham was staying. But the February night was fine, almost warm; there was a soft southerly wind

blowing. One could fancy that spring was not far off.

"Well, how are things going?" was the priest's greeting.

"They think it'll all be over by Wednesday," said Michael, guardedly. He never dared tell himself that there was any hope.

"Did Miss Nugent tell you that she'd been to see me?"

"Yes. I saw her in the Oratory to-night; she told me then."

"I want to talk to you about her," said the priest, in a very kind, friendly voice.

Michael's face was stern and frozen.

"What do you want to say about Anna?" he asked.

"Only that I'm sure she's very fond of you." He watched him as he spoke.

"Oh, there's nothing in that. She's devoted to us all. You see she lived with us for some years when she was a child. I haven't liked to let her do all she's insisted on doing for us now."

"But I want to talk to you about what you can give her—do for her," said the priest, gently.

"Give her? There's nothing I can give her. I can only take, and that goes most horribly against the grain. She's been a perfect angel sitting with my mother—giving up all her time to her—insisting upon bearing the burden of the costs. . . ." He stopped.

"I didn't of course know that," said Father Denham; "she wouldn't be likely to mention it. But Michael, has it never occurred to you why she was so unhappy in her engagement to Selvi?"

"I imagine it was because she didn't care for him. His mother was very anxious for it—she over-persuaded her."

"Nor why she was so happy when it was broken off?" pursued the priest.

"She was glad to be free."

"Yes, but why? Michael, you told her once that you loved her."

"Yes."

"And don't you love her now?"

"I'm not in a position to love anyone. I'm not going to ruin her life, if you mean that. Anna must forget me. She's very young. In a year or two she will have forgotten me—she will be thankful that she went back to Villa Caterina a free woman."

"Then you don't see you are ruining her life?"

Michael was silent. He remembered Anna's face as he had seen it that evening, bent in prayer and adoration. Never had he been so aware of her otherworldliness. He didn't think that temporal things disturbed her much. Like all devout Catholics she possessed that hidden interior life which passing events could neither touch nor affect. It placed her almost on another plane.

"She has never said a word to me," continued the priest, "but I am certain that she loves you. Your silence is breaking her heart."

"I think you are mistaken, Father. Anna and I have always been friends, but I'm sure she doesn't really care for me in any other way. Just now—with her beautiful pity—" He broke off; he could remember the look in her uplifted face in the dark windy street. "She wouldn't surely have said she'd marry Selvi if she'd ever cared for me. And I don't wish to marry her now. I am not going to ask her to share my ruined life and disgraced name!"

He looked straight in front of him as he spoke. It had been so hard not to tell her this evening that whatever happened they must not be separated. So hard to be cold and brutal, and leave her abruptly,

lest he should speak of his love against his better judgment. . . .

"At least give her the choice," said Father Denham. "Don't let your pride—it *is* only pride, Michael—stand in the way. You two were made for each other. It would be a holy, happy marriage for you both."

"It is far better for her to forget me. She's very young—she isn't twenty. In a few years—whatever her feelings may be now—she'll be grateful." His tone was hard.

"I don't think she will forget or feel gratitude. Michael—have a little pity on her."

Michael still stared in front of him. He couldn't believe it—wouldn't believe it. He had renounced her, deliberately, voluntarily, even while his love for her tormented him.

"I think you are making a mistake. Anna is kind—affectionate—quixotically generous. All her life she'll help lame dogs over stiles—it's her way. She's been a perfect dear to my mother. But there's nothing else. Nothing at all—at least for me."

"Then you won't speak to her?"

"How can I? Father—I've been fighting against it all these weeks. Don't ask me to give in now. I think when the trial's ended she'll go back to Italy. And who knows if she and Selvi——"

"There's no chance of that," said Father Denham, dryly. "I've seen Selvi—he's in London now. He's on his honeymoon."

"On his honeymoon? Then he's married? Father—you've roused my curiosity! Whom on earth has Benny married?"

But in spite of all things the news was an immense relief to him.

"Why, Miss Lawton of course. She followed him

out to New York with her friend, Mrs. Phipps-Moxon, and they fixed it up there."

"You do astonish me!" said Michael.

His face wore a clearer look.

"It's a very good match for her," he said presently.

"Yes. Has she seen Miss Nugent?"

"Anna didn't tell me."

"It'll be lonely for Miss Nugent going back to Sant' Elena quite alone."

"It's possible, you know, that my mother may go with her. But we don't like to think of that—it would mean something too dreadful. Don't try to persuade me, Father—I'm not thinking of myself. I'm thinking of her. . . ."

He knelt for the priest's blessing and then went away.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### NOT GUILTY

#### I

IT BECAME daily more apparent to those who followed the singular maze of evidence—some of it almost incomprehensible except to the expert in figures and finance—that, far from being guilty, Athelstan Nugent was a deeply wronged and innocent man.

The defalcations were of old standing; they dated from the first year of the War. Those immense sums which had been skilfully borrowed had been borrowed by Patton and used for his own ends. Had he lived it became obvious that he must have stood now where Nugent was standing. Each day further corroborative evidence in support of this theory was brought to light and was dealt with in the masterly, deadly, ingenious fashion for which Sir Horace Chenevix was famous.

It became apparent also that Nugent had done all he could since his partner's death to save the firm; he had advanced large sums of his own, had worked hard and made personal sacrifices, to pull the concern together. During Patton's life-time he had always played a subordinate rôle. He had been content to leave things in the hands of the older and more experienced man. Thus he had had little to say in the actual management of affairs until Patton's death—that sudden and culminating stroke which had revealed so many appalling irregularities to him.

Athelstan had always been cheerful, hopeful,

optimistic, and certain of his own capacity to pull things round—only give him half a chance! Let Europe return to her normal pre-War conditions, and he could soon get things going as well as ever. But as it takes time to rebuild and reconstruct a devastated city after an earthquake, so wounded and bleeding and stricken Europe could not at once resume her ancient activities, her international traffic and trading. Her tortured and unnerved sons and daughters could not at once return—and perhaps never with the old ardor—to the occupations that had been theirs before that mighty ploughshare razed her fair lands and her old and beautiful cities. The continued deterioration of trade, so marked during the years that immediately followed the Armistice, struck the death-blow to Athelstan's hopes.

Research showed him that Patton had not only borrowed public money entrusted to the firm for investment, but he had systematically falsified the accounts and balance sheets. He was a very able man with figures, few people indeed could manipulate them so cleverly, so convincingly as he could. No one had discovered anything, and Patton had died with the secret still safe in his own keeping.

It was difficult for Anna to follow it all; she was so unversed in the technicalities of finance. The long summaries of the trial that were published in all the papers perplexed her. But she followed the speech for the defense with passionate interest. In its clear, cold logic it seemed to open a path, illuminated with sunshine, across which Athelstan Nugent would surely go at last, a free man. . . .

There was a sudden outcry in the Press in his favor. The man had been so obviously a catspaw. He had been a pawn in the hands of Patton. People remembered Patton; and one or two trivial but unscrupulous actions of his, brought to light since his

death, were revived and published. Furthermore, it was fully established that in his own quixotic efforts to save the firm Athelstan had lost every farthing he possessed.

In spite of all this and of the gradual swerving of public opinion in his favor, Michael saw the jury return from what had seemed an almost interminable deliberation, with a sense of despair almost untouched by hope. During the trial he had so often studied the faces of these men upon whom his father's fate ultimately depended. There was one who listened to all the witnesses with a calm, incredulous smile. Another had a face that suggested he would always remain unconvinced by argument. Another was a mere boy with a weak chin. In almost every face his morbid imagination seemed to detect some trait that would tell against Athelstan in the end. . . .

A mist came before his eyes; he could hardly see his father standing there, looking pitifully small and defenseless beside the gigantic and burly warder. Were warders always chosen—so his thoughts irrelevantly ran—in order that they should make the prisoner look as mean and insignificant a creature as possible—to divert any sympathy that might otherwise have been felt for him in his hour of crying need? And yet in that now erect figure with the white face and burning eyes, there was something of nobility—a calm envisagement of a lost and hopeless cause. Michael felt rather than saw his heroic effort to hold himself very erect, to face his accusers without fear.

The usual formal question was put—the question to which so many thousands of unhappy beings have listened with sick suspense, and dumb, secret terror.

And then the answer rang through the court, incisive, emphatic:

*"Not guilty, my lord . . ."*

Everyone pressed forward to look at the prisoner, now a prisoner no more. Somewhere—far back in the court—there was a subdued murmur of applause, a faint clapping of hands. Athelstan turned his face in the direction of where his son was sitting. Michael was smiling triumphantly. He could not have spoken then; there was a lump in his throat that choked him. He had a horrible fear of breaking down here, in public, shamefully, for all men to see.

Then he heard a cry from the dock.

"Michael. . . ."

Athelstan Nugent uttering that cry fell forward. He would have fallen to the ground if the warders had not held him up in their strong arms. But the limp, flaccid figure seemed to slip from their grasp, to give way beneath them. There was a little thud.

An immense confusion reigned for the space of a few seconds. One woman shrieked, another sobbed, a third was carried away fainting. A doctor was almost instantly in attendance, for the suspense and shock of those culminating scenes of a trial have often exacted a bitter toll from the physique of those principally concerned, and skilled medical help is always at hand.

Michael pressed forward to where his father was lying. But no medical help could avail Athelstan Nugent now. His heart, weakened by the long suspense and ordeal of the trial, had failed suddenly.

Michael was clasping a dead man in his arms, and he felt his tears falling upon his father's face. Fantastically almost, it seemed to him that Almighty God had confirmed the verdict of man; had granted release to the prisoner.

"Not guilty. . . ."

The dramatic ending of the Nugent trial was a nine days' wonder in London, and a great deal of sympathy was shown to the dead man's wife and son.

Although it was only in its final phases that the trial had made any sentimental appeal to the public, there was a general consensus of opinion that the prosecution of Athelstan Nugent had been wholly arbitrary and mistaken.

Michael was haunted by the vision of that gray, shrunken, pallid figure in the dock. Sometimes he had seemed to be watching a stranger to whom he longed nevertheless to offer some sign of compassion and sympathy. Was that really his father? And then he would see the figure fall forward, heavily, inertly, so that even as he watched he realized that death had come to offer its final absolution, and bring its order of release. .

When the funeral was over, it was settled that Mrs. Nugent should go out to the Villa Caterina with Anna, who had begged her to consider this project. Mrs. Nugent was crushed and overwhelmed by the sudden blow that had befallen her, and she seemed to welcome the thought of journeying out to the sunshine and the South with Anna. Her children were all in London when this was decided. May had come up with Ching-Chang for the funeral, at which Rodney was also present. The family was once more reunited. The meeting between Mrs. Nugent and May was especially poignant.

"I couldn't help it, mother," she sobbed; "I did want to come up before but Ching-Chang wouldn't let me. It was an awful business for him to raise that money he'd borrowed, and he was so cross about it." She looked pale and beautiful in her deep mourning.

When they went back to Devonshire Rodney accompanied them. He was not wanted at the Wendles'. Stella declared that she was perfectly ill from all the horrors that were happening in the family, and as Rodney only reminded her of them he'd much better go and stay with May. After all, the Nugents were his relations, not hers. She never, never wanted to see any of them again. "I've been let in," she had sobbed as he was going out of the room, and the words rang in his head all the way up to town. He was miserable, and he could almost envy Michael's grief. Grief for the dead seemed such a wholesome, simple emotion, it did not stab one like this bitterness of a perished love.

When Mrs. Nugent said, "How is Stella, Rodney?" he only answered, "She is pretty well. She didn't feel up to the journey though in this cold weather," and wondered if anyone could possibly be deceived. Sometimes he felt that there could be no outcome to his marriage but a judicial separation. Stella seemed to hate the sight of him.

It was a relief to them all to know that Anna was so very anxious Mrs. Nugent should return to Sant' Elena with her. It was such a comfortable solution of the problem.

"Why's she doing it, do you think?" Lord Chingford inquired of his wife when they were in the train on their way back to Devonshire.

"Oh, you know she's always been in love with Michael since she was quite a little girl. Mamma was quite nervous about it at one time!"

"Well, he might do worse. Jolly good-looking girl. And she's got some money too, hasn't she?"

"Not much—he'd want more than that now," said May.

Michael was the only one who showed any dislike to the proposed plan. They had already accepted

so much from Anna that to take anything further seemed to him insupportable. But in the end his anxiety for his mother's welfare prevailed. In that quiet sunny retreat he felt that she would recover something of her old tranquillity.

Besides, her financial affairs were in such a condition that the problem of her future was sufficiently urgent. Even the tiny, uncomfortable flat in Chelsea was beyond her means, and Michael was not in a position to keep it up for any length of time. Rodney and May contributed what they could, though it seemed to Michael that these sums were trivial and absurd in comparison to those they had received from their father.

He went to the station to see the departure of the travelers. Mrs. Nugent was almost cheerful at the thought of the journey.

"It's most awfully good of you, Anna," he said gratefully, when they were left for a moment together. "I can never thank you enough."

"But I hate being thanked." She smiled brightly.

He thought she was looking more than ever beautiful to-day with that faint tinge of color in her cheeks that were so pale as a rule, the brightness of her fair hair under her black hat, her dark gray eyes softened and shaded by the black lashes.

"I'll work hard. I shall soon be able to make a home for her. Just at first you know it isn't so easy, but I've got something to begin with."

It was only a subordinate position in a city office, just the kind of thing he most hated, but it was all that had so far been offered to him, and he had accepted it eagerly.

"I'm sure you'll take no end of care of her," he said, glancing towards his mother.

"You needn't be afraid. And I think when she gets a little better that she'll love the peace of it."

"Write sometimes, Anna——"

"Yes. And someday perhaps when you've time you'll come out and pay us a visit."

"Ah, you mustn't tempt me. I've got to work in good earnest. I feel that I've only played up till now."

"Don't overwork, Michael," she said, struck suddenly by his thin, rather gaunt look, his sad tired eyes.

"You must get in now," he said hastily, moving towards the train. Mrs. Nugent was sitting in a corner seat, enveloped in furs. For a time at least her clothes would show no diminution of elegance. Michael felt that he would have hated to see his mother looking shabby.

"Good-bye, darling Michael. Take care of yourself," said Mrs. Nugent.

Michael sprang into the compartment and kissed her.

"I know you'll be all right with Anna," he said.

He turned and shook hands with Anna.

"Don't forget to write——"

The train moved slowly out of the station. It seemed to him then that a chapter of his life was definitely closed. And it was the long chapter that held Anna.

### 3

Michael worked all day at the office in the city, returning in the evening to a small room he had taken in Bloomsbury near the British Museum. It was a part of London he had always liked, and on Saturday afternoons when he was free he felt that the Reading Room would be a great attraction.

Often now he sat up far into the night, writing. As it was his habit to rise early and go to Mass

before breakfast, his hours of sleep were necessarily very much curtailed, and the physical strain showed itself in a certain attenuation of both face and figure. He was very spare now, and the bony structure of his face was curiously visible, and increased that rather gaunt look which Anna had first noticed at the station.

Some time before, he had begun a novel for his own amusement, and lately he had found that to continue it took his thoughts away from the contemplation of those misfortunes which had befallen himself and his family. He had gone back to it with fresh zest. He didn't know whether what he wrote was good or bad; he only knew that it interested him, and that his day's work seemed really to begin when he mounted the stairs to his rather austere little attic and sat down by the writing-table. Several of his contemporaries at Oxford were now making a good living by their pen. Of course it wasn't likely that success would come to him at once—success was capricious and seldom came, as he knew, when she was most needed. Never perhaps at a highly critical moment like the present.

If his mother had remained with him he felt that it would have been impossible to write. She would certainly have claimed his evening hours, at least until ten o'clock, and would have been perturbed too, had she discovered that he sat up so late. He knew that solitude was essential for the task he had set himself.

The book grew rapidly under his hand. In every first book there is perhaps much of the author's personality, but on the other hand few first books ever see the light. The author does not all at once attain to that objective attitude towards the creatures of his own fashioning, and thus while the actual incidents of his book may be wholly dissimilar to his

own experience of life, he cannot help something of himself flowing into the stream of its happenings.

And this was Michael's first essay in fiction. He had no previous book lying in a sepulchre such as most authors possess, wherein the yellowing pages and fading ink are relegated to oblivion, perhaps to be unearthed in the far future by some zealous literary executor to shame the writer's uneasy ghost. . . . Although he had contributed occasional short articles to evening papers, and had written a poem or two in his Oxford days, fiction had hitherto been to him an unknown, very attractive field. He was astonished and also a little bit preoccupied at the facility with which he wrote, at the amount of his nightly output. He had a natural fear that what had been achieved so easily could not possibly be of any value. There was no one to tell him that his style had an individual note, authentic and sincere. Once or twice it did occur to him that he wished Anna could see it. But no—she would have been far too partial a critic; she would have been so afraid, too, of discouraging him by any adverse comment.

When it was finished he sent it, with some hesitation, to be typed. The typing of such a long manuscript was an expensive affair. But on the other hand he could hardly expect any publisher to read through that mass of handwriting, not always too clear.

On its return he took it to a friend of his who was employed by a firm of publishers. If this plan failed he made up his mind to relegate the task of placing it to a literary agent, but in the first instance he would approach Carr.

"I say—could you look at this for me?" he said, putting the heap of typed sheets on the table.

Carr in describing the episode afterwards to a mutual friend said: "That poor chap Nugent came

to me with a book he'd just written. He was looking frightfully hard up."

"They did lose everything, I heard."

"Yes. He gave me the impression he must be almost starving."

Carr had not seen Michael since the disaster that had wrecked the firm of Nugent and Son. But before then he had often visited at the house in Lancaster Gate, and had dined there fairly regularly. He had always liked Michael, but had lately lost sight of him, which was scarcely to be wondered at considering Nugent's present mode of life.

"Well, we'll have a look at it," said Carr, handling the typed sheets in a way that made Michael shiver, just as if he had seen a child being roughly used.

"Thanks very much. You'll let me know as soon as you can?"

"Oh, yes—we always deal with them promptly. It's a bit long from the look of it."

"Oh, is it?"

"Yes. Of course when you've made your name it doesn't matter what length your books are."

"I don't think I could cut it down."

"They all say that," laughed Carr.

Michael went away feeling discouraged. "I oughtn't to have taken it to Carr—it isn't in his line," he thought. He felt unreasonably sensitive about it—the book seemed so intimately bound up with his own life and all its hopes and fears. It was part of him, flesh of his flesh. Only to see Carr handling it had hurt him. He had touched it so carelessly. Of course to him it was perhaps only one of hundreds of unsalable, unpublishable manuscripts. Carr would only see its faults, its verbosity, its lack of "shape"—the errors of technique which can be remedied only by constant practice. . . .

Yet now it was finished, Michael wondered how

he had been able to write it, straight off like that, with hardly any difficulty, and with such rapidity. Never had there been a book so little "planned." He had just gone on quietly watching the progress of events, the movements of the actors, like a deeply interested spectator who was pledged to note down all he saw. He couldn't have told anyone just how he had done it.

A fortnight later he received a note from Carr: "Come round and see me this evening at my club. I want to have a talk with you about *Retribution*."

Michael felt strangely elated. Of course it might mean nothing, but it was a great deal more encouraging than to receive a parcel containing the rejected manuscript with the usual stereotyped letter of politely-worded refusal. He dared not, however, hope much from the interview with Carr. He was probably just going to let him down easily.

Michael entered the club to which he had once belonged, feeling a trifle shabby and ashamed of his shabbiness. Carr appeared, looking very spruce and smart. He shook Michael's hand warmly.

"Come in here." He led the way into a small room. "We can talk privately here."

They sat down near the fire, for the night was cold, and then Carr said:

"I liked your book though it's not quite in my line. But I got old Bishopstone to read it, and he's frightfully keen on it."

"Keen on it?" Michael's face had gone deathly white; he grasped the arm of his chair.

"Like a drink, old thing?" said Carr, cheerily. His voice sounded a long day off.

"No . . . no. . . . Tell me about Bishopstone."

"Well, he seems willing to give you a sum down for all the rights—American included. We don't generally do that, and sometimes it works out against

the author if the book makes a hit. Still, in your case I thought you might prefer it." He glanced almost involuntarily at the pale thin face, the steady blue eyes, and then at the worn clothes.

"In my case it would certainly be very useful," said Michael, forcing a smile. He was surely dreaming. "How much——?"

Carr named a sum which seemed to Michael out of all proportion to the work in question. It had been so easy, had cost him so little, except for those few hours robbed each night from sleep, and that awful bill for typing at the end.

"Come and have some dinner. We'll discuss it in more detail afterwards."

"Oh, I couldn't dine here in this kit!" said Michael, ruefully.

"Rot, man! What does it matter?" He led the way into the dining-room. It was early, and to Michael's relief there were not many people present, and he saw no one whom he knew.

It seemed strange to be having what he called a "civilized" meal again. Since his misfortunes he had steadily refused all invitations, pleading lack of time, and his frugal meals had been eaten in cheap restaurants or tea-rooms. And lately he had been driven to an extra measure of economy in order to pay the typist's bill. He had parted with clothes and some of his books to make up the necessary sum.

"Look here, Nugent," said Carr presently, when the meal was almost finished. "You mustn't think you're going to wake up and find yourself famous, or any bunkum of that sort. Still, the book's got a fresh idea, and it's strongly written and well-treated, shows a grasp of men and things. Been writing long?"

"I've scribbled a little for a long time, but this is the first shot I've had at fiction."

"Got other work, I suppose?"

"Yes, a job in the city that eats up most of my day."

So he had worked at night—he looked like it, reflected Carr.

"If this makes the hit Bishopstone expects, you'll be able to give up your job and concentrate upon writing."

"Oh, do you think that's possible?"

"Other men have done it," said Carr. "But there's always a risk, till you've got your oar well in. Bishopstone doesn't seem to think there's any doubt. I tell you this—if he hadn't thought frightfully well of it, he'd never have made you such an offer. You'll hear from us in a day or two—we'll send you the contract."

Michael felt elated. His thoughts flew to the Villa Caterina; this evening it seemed a little closer, so close indeed that he could see the lights on the Bay and shore, and hear the wash of the sea against the dark tufa cliffs. . . .

"It's just eight months——" he murmured dreamily, forgetting Carr's presence. Eight months since he had left Sant' Elena. It seemed like centuries. Never had any single year of his life been so crammed with events, tragic, untoward, sublimely beautiful, as this one that had passed. And out of the mists of it he seemed to see Anna—the fairy child as he had once called her—beckoning to him.

"Eight months?" Carr caught at the words.

"Oh, nothing. . . . Michael looked embarrassed.

Carr noticed that he had eaten little, almost as if he had reached that stage of hunger when the sight of food sickens rather than tempts.

"I say, old chap, you've been overdoing it, haven't you? Take a holiday—that's my advice."

"Perhaps I may—on the strength of this," said Michael. "When shall I have the proofs?"

"Oh, perhaps in about a month. And we'll send you something in advance if you like, and the balance on publication."

"It would be awfully good of you to send me—anything you can—in advance," said Michael. "And I say, Carr, I'm sure you've had a lot to do with getting me such favorable terms. I'm most awfully grateful."

"Oh, that's all right," said Carr.

He knew that the book in any case would make a sentimental appeal. People would know that the author was a son of the Nugent who had dropped down dead in court immediately after hearing the jury's verdict of *Not guilty*. It would be read for that reason if for no other. And in this way it would have a good start. That meant a great deal when the work was that of a new, untried author. But Michael's book possessed qualities that would insure for it a certain steady sale.

Carr had immense faith in the *flair* of his chief, who was said never to have made a mistake in the commercial value of a book, and who was willing to secure Michael's upon almost any terms. Carr had obtained a larger sum than Bishopstone had thought of offering in the first instance. He had pleaded for his friend.

"If we let this go he's bound to find another publisher," he had said, convincingly.

Michael went back to his lodgings that night with a queer sense of elation. It didn't seem real—this prospective affluence. But even that seemed more probable than that his book should be any good. He couldn't judge of it himself—it had interested him, and he had read it again almost eagerly when it

came back from being typed. And sometimes while writing it he had forgotten his poverty-stricken surroundings, his cold, fireless room, his hunger for sleep, and had been unaware of the passing of time. But he had never thought it would be accepted so soon. Behind Carr's careless, slightly superior manner he had discerned something of secret enthusiasm.

He wouldn't leave his mother at Sant' Elena living on Anna's diminished fortune any longer. . . . She had been there nearly three months, and if she still wished to remain and Anna proved willing to keep her, it must be upon a fixed monetary basis. It had always hurt him to feel that his mother was practically living on Anna's charity, after all she had done, too, in the way of assisting them. But he was cheered to think that there was some hope now of his being able in the future to pay her back every farthing. . . . He had only to work . . . and if this book proved the success Carr seemed to think it would, he meant to give himself up wholly to the game of writing.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE DREAM IS FULFILLED

#### I

DEAR MICHAEL: (wrote Anna)

Aunt Juliet isn't very well, and I know she wants to see you, but when I suggest inviting you to come here she always says she doesn't dare ask you to leave your work. She is so afraid you might lose your post if you took a holiday so soon. But you will know best if it is at all feasible, and so I am writing to say how glad we should both be if you could manage a little visit. The place is looking so lovely now, and to-day the sea is like a lake that mirrors everything. It is all blue and silver, and the mountains are blue too, the color of those dark grapes we get in Italy, before the bloom is rubbed off them. The wistaria is over, and the storm we had two days ago swept off the last blossoms from the Judas trees and left them lying in bright pink heaps on the terrace. But the roses are in perfection and are rioting over everything, and the Madonna lilies are out, and last night I saw a firefly. Do come if you can. I'm sure the change would do you good. And it seems such a very long time since you were here. And then Aunt Juliet isn't well, and I know she wants you. By the way, I sent for the doctor last week. I think he is rather anxious about her, but she is not suffering any pain. She sends her best love.

Michael received the letter soon after his interview with Carr. At first it aroused no particular anxiety within him, but on a second reading he discovered at least matter for serious preoccupation.

Two facts stood out very clearly. His mother was ill—perhaps more ill than Anna had ventured to tell him—and she wanted him. She hadn't liked to ask him to come, and Anna had obviously made the suggestion on her own responsibility. There was something even a little urgent in that: *Do come.* . . .

He had already received a check from Carr for half the amount he was to receive for the full rights in *Retribution*. There was nothing to prevent him from starting for Villa Caterina as soon as his passport was in order. As yet he had said nothing to his relations about the book; he had wanted to keep the matter a secret until nearer the day of publication.

"The doctor was anxious. . . . She suffered no pain." Scraps from Anna's letter floated through his brain, teasing him with their ominous suggestion of something not fully disclosed. And if the matter hadn't been urgent, Anna would not have written that letter. It must have cost her something to invite him to the Villa Caterina. A man who had told her frankly that he loved and couldn't marry her. A man, too, who had practically extorted a confession of love from her. Oh, there were things between himself and Anna—beautiful dead things—that made it very difficult for them to meet. He didn't want to go there, he didn't want to see Anna . . . and yet paradoxically the Villa Caterina was the one place in the world where he wished to be.

Practical matters took up his time for the next day or two. He made all the necessary preparations for his journey, and also had an interview with his chief, tendering his resignation. Mr. Edscombe, an old friend of his father's, was astonished.

"I suppose you know what you're doing, my boy, but it isn't easy nowadays to get even the sort of work you're doing here," he said.

"Yes, I know that. I appreciate all you've done for me. But my mother's ill in Italy, and I must go to her."

"Well, in the circumstances we might stretch a point and keep your job open for you for a few weeks. You wouldn't want to be away longer than that, would you?"

Michael was touched by his kindness, and the note of almost paternal solicitude in his voice. Nevertheless it was with a secret pride that he was able to say: "You see, I've got the prospect of literary work. I'm going to publish a novel. But it's most awfully kind of you all the same."

Mr. Edscombe was not without a certain contempt for literary men; they so seldom possessed any business sense, and it was often remarkable that even the highly successful ones left but moderate fortunes. However, he supposed that Nugent knew his own affairs best, so he said heartily: "I hope it will be a tremendous success. I never look at one myself but my wife's a great novel-reader—I'll tell her to be sure and ask for it at the library." Then he added: "We shall be sorry to lose you here. We've seldom had a clerk like you, and we'd marked you down for a promotion quite soon. Good-bye."

Michael was rather thankful to escape. On his way home he sent a telegram to Anna to say that he should arrive on the following Thursday morning. Now that everything was settled he felt a queer impatience to start.

He felt as if Tuesday—the day of his departure—would never come. Mingled with his impatience there was an undercurrent of anxiety which he tried to assure himself was causeless. Anna's letter had not hinted at any danger. And yet, on the other hand, he felt she would never have sent for him unless there had been urgent need.

Carr informed him that the proofs could easily be sent out to him, if he had not returned by the time they were ready. There was really nothing to detain him in London, and it was with a delightful sense of being free and his own master again that he drove to Victoria Station in time for the boat-train.

## 2

Anna met him at the station at Sant' Elena in that cool early-morning hour when land and sea and sky were all merged in one divine crystal clearness. She looked very calm and composed in her white linen dress and shady straw hat.

He held her hand, and their eyes met. When they looked at each other it was with a sense of remembered secrets, of exquisite beautiful hours, and those things which made for a more poignant intimacy—the anxiety and suspense of dark days once shared. . . .

It was the remembrance of those days, he thought, that made Anna seem as if she did indeed belong to him.

"Mother didn't come?" he said, when the first greetings were over. He had somehow expected her to be there.

"No. She's never up so early as this. I'm afraid you'll find her changed," said Anna, looking steadily in front of her.

Something in her tone struck him, and he said: "Your letter puzzled me. You didn't mean, did you, that it was anything serious?"

"Well, not serious in the sense of immediate danger. But she is ill, you know. At first I thought it was just nervous shock and that she would get better. But it's her heart, and she's getting weaker . . . and that's why I thought you ought to come."

"I came as soon as I could."

"Yes. I didn't think you'd be able to get away so quickly. I hope it wasn't frightfully inconvenient?"

"Oh, no; I'd been thinking of chucking my job for some weeks past. I only did it a little sooner than I intended."

"Oh, I'm so sorry you had to do that. Won't it make a difference, Michael?"

"Edscombe was jolly decent about it. Offered to keep my job open for me for a few weeks. But the fact is, Anna——" He paused, and something of the old happy light came into his eyes. "I think you must be the first to hear my secret."

She suddenly realized that he was looking ever so much happier than he had done a few months ago. When she had parted from him in London, he had looked worn and almost ill with grief and suffering. Now he was not so greatly changed from the Michael of a year ago, and as she wondered what stroke of luck, what unexpected good fortune had contributed to this, a faint misgiving chilled her. Perhaps he was going to tell her that he was engaged to be married. She looked up quickly into his face.

"You'll laugh, Anna, but I'm going to come out as a novelist!"

"Really? A novelist?"

"Yes. I've written a book, and Carr's got old Bishopstone to say he'll publish it."

"But Michael—how did you find time, with all your other work?"

"Midnight oil. Where I was so lucky was in finding a publisher to take it up without any delay!"

"Oh, I'm so awfully glad. You always wanted to write—do you remember? It is splendid!"

He was touched by her frank enthusiasm.

"Your mother will be proud!"

"It made it possible for me to come out here. You see they gave me a lot in advance!"

"But isn't that unusual?"

"Well, I'm telling you I've been unusually lucky. I only hope Carr won't regret it. Perhaps it'll be an awful frost. But Anna, I thought if Mother wanted to go back to London now I could take her."

Something in his tone startled her. Why should he think Mrs. Nugent wished to leave the Villa Caterina? She had never mentioned any desire of the sort to Anna. What had made Michael think of such a thing?

"You must see her first. But she's never said she wished to go away."

"Well, she can't remain here forever. You've been far too kind and—generous—as it is. It wouldn't be fair to you. . . ."

"It wouldn't be fair to me to take her away now," she answered.

"We mustn't," said Michael, "begin by quarreling." He smiled down at her.

"I'm so sure, you see, that she doesn't want to go. It would be almost cruel to persuade her. And when you begin about my kindness and generosity. . . ." Her eyes shone with indignation.

"Oh, I promise not to sing that tune to her," he hastily informed her.

They were in sight now of the villa, standing square to the sea upon its rocky promontory and making a flush of warm pink between the trees. The path from the gate was bordered on both sides by a rim of wonderful scarlet geraniums, great bushes of them, splendid and flame-like with their red velvet blossoms. The pines and cypresses and ilex-trees made beautiful blots of dark green fire against the pallor of sea and sky. To the right the blunt purple arm of San Gervasio was thrust into the sea. Far off

they could see the great headland by Spezia outlined in shadowy silhouette.

They went up the path to the house, and Anna opened the door for him to go in. At the foot of the staircase she paused:

"Your mother's in my old room. It's so much larger and more comfortable. I thought she would be happier there."

"Oh, but Anna—you shouldn't. . . ."

"I didn't tell her it was my room, so you mustn't. I felt she'd like to be there. And she simply loves the view when she can't come down."

"Can't she even come down to the loggia?" he asked, and his astonishment was mingled with a renewed sense of dismayed anxiety.

"She hasn't been downstairs at all for a fortnight. Not since I wrote to you. Shall I show you the way? You can't think how much she's looking forward to seeing you. The only thing is——" She paused and looked at him dubiously. "I'm afraid you may find it difficult to go away again, now you are here. Still, perhaps you could write? I think I could rig up a study for you. . . ."

"Oh, no—I can't possibly stay," said Michael, with decision.

He followed Anna up the stairs.

At the top she paused and knocked softly at the door of Mrs. Nugent's room.

"May I come in, Aunt Juliet?"

"Yes, come in, my dear."

The voice was like a mere, thin thread of sound. It was attenuated—a ghost-voice. It prepared Michael better than anything for the change of which Anna had tried to tell him.

Anna opened the door, leaving it a little ajar. And through the aperture Michael caught a glimpse of a figure lying on a *chaise-longue* near the open window.

"Darling—Michael's here. May he come in?"  
"Michael!"

He came quickly across the room and knelt by the side of her couch while Mrs. Nugent stretched out two fragile transparent hands and took his face in them.

Anna had quietly withdrawn and closed the door. And these were the words that greeted him:

"Oh, Michael—I did want you. I am dying. . . ."

### 3

When Anna saw him next, coming towards her on the terrace, his stricken face told its own tale. For a few minutes he stood by her side in silence, leaning his arms in the old way on the ledge of the stone balustrade. The light from that bright sky hurt his eyes that were still sore and hot with unshed tears.

"I'm sorry . . . Michael. . . ."

"You should have told me."

"She wouldn't let me. She was so afraid of disturbing you. But at last I felt I must write."

"Has she been like this long?"

"The great change for the worse came when I wrote to you a fortnight ago. But there's no immediate danger."

"We must write to May and Rodney. They ought to come."

"Can Rodney leave Stella?"

"Yes, she's perfectly all right. And she's still with her own people. He can come quite well; he could travel out with May. We must talk it over."

"Yes, but you must rest first, Michael. After your journey—and all your work." She noticed for the first time how thin he was.

"Anna, I could move her away from here if you liked. Why should you have the trouble of this ill-

ness in the house? As you said, there is simply no question of her going back to England or of my leaving her. Don't you think we'd better make other arrangements?"

"Oh, Michael—don't talk like that! I love having her, and she's so happy. I think she forgets sometimes she isn't in her own home. And Father Denham's here—he often comes and sits with her."

"Sits with her?" Michael looked astonished and puzzled.

"Yes—it's made a wonderful difference to her. She was so miserable and depressed at first, and now she's quite brave and bright. You mustn't think of taking her away—and you mustn't think of going yourself . . . for her sake, Michael."

"Oh, I can't leave her. I see that."

"And you used to like it here," she reminded him. He turned away. "It was different then."

"Is it all so changed?"

"For me—everything is changed. . . ."

He sat with his mother a great deal. At night she was taken care of by a nun of an English nursing order, but Anna, as he soon discovered, was head-nurse during the day. There was a warm friendship now between Mrs. Nugent and Anna, close and intimate like that of a mother and daughter. But when he came into the sick-room Anna always went away, leaving them alone together.

He hadn't liked coming back to the Villa Caterina—Anna knew that—but after a few days he seemed more reconciled to his lot, and less inclined to believe that he was horribly in the way. It was very different from his former visit, when everything had seemed so fair and beautiful, and which yet at the end had terminated in what for him had been a real tragedy, the engagement of Anna to Count Selvi. Now she was free, and he was practically ruined; the chances

of his making good seemed to him very remote, in spite of the faint hope he could not help cherishing for the success of *Retribution*. And here he was, seeing Anna every day, intimately associated with her in all the hopes and fears that were bound up with his mother's illness. Daily he found his position more and more difficult. Father Denham did not again refer to the subject when talking to him, though the two men saw each other frequently. Michael was quite in the dark as to the state of Anna's feelings. She was older now, more of a woman; the happenings of last winter had given her a maturer outlook, and it might well be that her girlish dreams, too, had changed. Once, it is true, he might have played some little part in them, but he could not believe that he was anything to her now. She was so quiet and friendly, thoughtful and solicitous for his comfort, anxious that he should feel perfectly at home. Nothing else, nothing more.

But he liked to think she was so necessary to his mother, waiting on her just as a little daughter might have done. She wasn't only a fairy child; there was something rocky and dependable in her character. But all the time they were strange and reserved with each other. The old frank friendship had quite gone. They were like two people sharing an uncomfortable secret, to which no allusion must ever be made. And all the time between them was the dark shadow of Mrs. Nugent's illness.

The change in her was continuous though barely perceptible to those who watched her day by day. There was simply nothing to be done, and it was a comfort to Michael to feel that she was quite happy and had everything she wanted, and that they were both doing all they could for her. She was soon too weak to talk much, but when he was sitting with her, she used to lie there with her eyes fixed upon him.

One day she said suddenly: "Michael."

"Yes, mother?"

"I've thought—I've hoped, perhaps, that you and Anna. . . ."

"Oh, mother—that was all at an end long ago. Not that it ever had a beginning."

"When she left London, two years ago, I thought you were beginning to care for her."

"Yes, I cared for her then. I cared very much."

"And she didn't?"

"She got engaged to Selvi."

"Oh, that ought never to have happened. She told me how glad she was when it was broken off—to think she was free. . . ."

He took her hand in his. It was so slender and shrunken now, very white and transparent.

"Mother, I do love Anna still. But you must see how it is. I'm hardly in a position to marry."

"With your writing—" she said.

"Yes. But it wouldn't be fair to her."

"Michael. . . ."

"Yes, dear Mother."

"Don't think me a troublesome old woman. But I should like to know you two were married before I die. You love her, and I'm sure she loves you. Anna is very faithful. . . . Once in London I said something to her to try to make her think you didn't care for her except as a child, a little cousin. But now . . . It's what I want for you. You mustn't let your pride or anything else stand in your way. And Michael. . . ." Her voice sank to a whisper. He had to bend down to catch the words.

"Yes?" he said gently.

"Let it be soon. . . ."

## 4

After dinner that evening Michael and Anna went out into the warm, windy darkness of the garden. Anna had wrapped herself in a white Venetian shawl that made her look very pale, almost like a spirit, he thought. They followed the familiar path between the thick groves of ilex and pine-trees, past the wan Madonna lilies that offered their fragrance like some sweet incense, standing there tall and erect, their blossoms showing pallid in the gloom.

"Come on to the terrace. You've been indoors nearly all day—I'm sure you need some fresh air. I only wish you'd come out in the boat. . . ." Michael said.

"No—it's too rough to-night. It wouldn't be safe. Don't you hear what a noise the sea's making?"

They were standing on the terrace now, and below them they could hear the sea as it washed heavily against the steps, cut out of the cliff, that led down to the landing stage—heaving too, against the rocks and tossing the white spray into the air. There was no moon, but the stars were very bright, and low in the southwest Spica was shining with its steady, golden brilliance.

They could see the bright, colorless light flashing from the lantern on the summit of San Gervasio, and the long rows of lamps, glimmering in the distance, that marked some coast-town lying between the mountains and the sea.

All day his mother's words had haunted him. But now that the opportunity he had deliberately sought had come, he felt unable to speak. He had been in Italy for a month, and to-night a parcel of proofs had reached him from Carr. They made him feel as if his feet were already firmly placed on the first rung of the ladder.

"Anna," he said suddenly.

She turned quickly. "Yes, Michael?"

"It was here, wasn't it, that I first told you—what you were to me?"

"Yes."

"You had just said that you were going to marry Selvi. . . ."

"Yes. It was that day——"

She could remember the scene so well, a quiet and beautiful summer evening, full of the fierce, almost sickly, scent of the tuberoses. Always they had reminded her of Michael, and of that bitter moment; she had given orders for them to be removed before she left Italy last winter.

To-night it was even more beautiful, with the Madonna lilies looking pure and white in the dusk, and the fireflies flitting among them like winged jewels.

"I wish I dared tell you, Anna, that I love you now more than ever."

All these weeks she had believed that whatever love he had once had for her had perished under the strain and stress of last winter. They had both been so busy in the simple practical occupation of tending Mrs. Nugent, that there had been but little room for anything so personal as a revival of that old love. She had never expected to hear him tell her again that he loved her. Sometimes she had even fancied that he was weary of staying there, that he was half impatient to go away. . . .

Now his words came to her across the warm darkness of the June night like some strange music that formed part of all the music of the world—the soughing of the wind in the cypress-trees, the breaking of the waves at their feet . . . the wild, beautiful sounds of Nature that eternally haunted this sea-girt garden of hers.

She came a little nearer.

"Tell me, Michael . . . I want to hear."

"Do you really mean that, Anna?"

"Yes," she said.

His hand grasped hers, he drew her gently to him.

"I've loved you since you were a little girl. I can't tell you what it's been like staying here all these weeks—seeing you every day—loving you more and more, and knowing all the time that I was almost a pauper—that I'd no right to ask you to be my wife."

"You never thought it might be worse for me to have to bear your silence, Michael?" She lifted her face to his, smiling. She wondered now that she could ever have doubted his love. It seemed the most wonderful, and at the same time the most simple and natural thing in the world, that Michael should love her.

"And we shan't be paupers," she went on; "we can live here, and you'll have your writing. But your mother . . . we must tell her. Oh, Michael, do you think she'll mind?"

"Mind? Why she wants it more than anything! She wants it to take place soon. Before. . . ." His voice dropped. "Could you do that for her, Anna? I know it's asking a great deal of you. But we have waited for each other so long, haven't we?" His eyes were fixed wistfully upon her face.

He bent down and kissed her. "Could you, Anna?" he said.

She heard the crisp wash of the sea beating against the steps and rocks far beneath them, the bubbling sound of a nightingale's song coming from the shadows of the ilex-grove, the stirring of the wind as it brushed the branches of the pines above their heads, and mingling with them all Michael's voice telling her

that he loved her. And now he would never go away again. Their life would be spent here.

"I should like to give her this happiness," he said.

"Shall we go up and tell her?" said Anna.

He drew her hand within his arm and they went towards the house.

## CHAPTER XX

### A LETTER FROM COUNTESS BENEDETTO SELVI

FROM Countess Selvi Lawton, Villa Selvi, Sant' Elena, Liguria, Italy, to Mrs. Phipps-Moxon, Grosvenor Mansions, Park Lane.

July 25th, 19—.

DEAREST ELLEN:

We have come here for a few days to stay with my mother-in-law, and the first thing that greeted us was the surprising news of Anna's marriage. She and Michael were married very quietly about three weeks ago at the Cathedral here by Father Denham. They had to forego their wedding journey because Mrs. Nugent was too ill to be left, so they returned to Villa Caterina after the ceremony. It seems that Mrs. Nugent had implored them to have the wedding before she died. And they were really only just in time, for she died not a week later. She was received into the Church by Father Denham some days before her death, and had the Last Sacraments while still quite conscious. I have learnt to look at these things rather differently under Benny's ægis, so can picture the consolation it must have been to them all.

Of course you have heard what a hit Michael's book *Retribution* is making, although it has only been out such a short time. He takes it very quietly, I believe, but Anna is tremendously proud! He intends, I hear, to devote himself entirely to literary work, and that means they will go on living at the Villa Caterina. It's rather like a fairy tale, isn't it? But Anna's so good, she deserves her luck. . . .

I've seen her. She looks quietly but radiantly happy.

Of course Mrs. Nugent's illness tried her a good deal; she helped to nurse her, and latterly I believe was hardly ever out of the room. She looks a little tired, and they are just going off to Switzerland for a few weeks' rest.

I think she's been in love with him for years. It's one of those marriages that really do seem to have been made in heaven. I never thought Anna pretty before, but now she looks quite beautiful. They are perfectly happy, and one can't help feeling glad that they have come together at last.

Rodney and Stella have been out here too, and have only just gone back to England. Things seem to have been patched up between them, and I really don't see what she has to complain of. They have plenty of money, and I hear their little son is simply lovely. It's time she stopped howling. I'm told Rodney gives Anna all the credit for this change—she spoke to Stella so wisely and kindly, and tried to put some sense into her silly little head. I caught a glimpse of Rodney one day in Rapallo. I won't say more, but I do prefer my Benedetto.

The countess is quite civil, and I'm behaving like a model daughter-in-law. I do wish you could see Anna!

Your affectionate,  
GAY SELVI.

THE END



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